

Harry Potter and the Spiritus Crystalus

Chapter 1 - Trouble at the Burrow

Return to the Burrow...

The Weasley Family, including one Harry Potter, waited out in the car park of Kings Crossing Train Station while Ron and Hermione said goodbye one final time. Ron looked forlorn when he finally turned away and returned to his family. The Grangers got into their automobile and drove away with Hermione looking equally devastated.

This time the Weasleys were returning to the Burrow in style. As Deputy Minister, Arthur rated a government car, a driver and a member of the Ministry Protective Services. The protective services claimed to be better than Aurors, but they were much smaller in size and had a totally different mission than the Aurors did.

Although it was a Ministry car, it was a muggle vehicle. The only difference being that its interior had been enchanted to be much roomier than it should have been. According to Arthur, the ride was still going to be several hours long, but at least it would be comfortable.

Harry sat next to one window, Ginny next to him. Ron had another window, which he stared out of, lost in thought, while Molly and Arthur chatted among themselves.

Harry sat considering a conversation he'd had with Dumbledore just before he left for the train station in Hogsmeade. Dumbledore had caught up with him and drew him aside just before he left the building.

"Harry, before you leave for the summer, might I have a word with you?"

"Of course, Professor."

"Harry, this summer I want you to be careful. Just because you can apparate now, remember the restrictions. We will have people watching over you, but I want your promise that if you decide to go anywhere, you will either take Remus or another Order member along with you. No unescorted trips to Diagon Alley or to London. You may apparate from the Burrow and Grimmauld Place unescorted, but that's it.

"Around the Burrow we'll have Order members watching out for you, so the Burrow and nearby Ottery St. Catchpole will be alright for you to roam around in unescorted."

"I understand Professor. I didn't think I'd be allowed complete freedom and, to be honest, it's more than I expected."

"It's not just your safety we're worried about Harry. True you are our main concern, but we realize the importance of your family to you, and Miss Weasley in particular."

Harry nodded in agreement. Put that way, he couldn't help but to agree.

Ginny nudged Harry, who turned to look at her.

"He's taking it pretty hard I think," she said in a low tone, looking in Ron's direction.

"I know. I'd be heart broken if I had to leave you behind. But maybe I can cheer him up a bit."

Harry pulled his sketch pad out of his pocket and enlarged it to its normal size. He flipped through the book until he found the drawing of Ron and Hermione down by the lake. It was a nice picture, but it didn't fill up the whole page, just the center of it.

Ginny watched curiously as Harry began to add more pictures in the corner areas of the page. Hermione smiling, a small picture of the couple at the dance, holding each other closely, Ron and Hermione sitting at the table in the Great Hall. Finally, instead of adding another picture of Hermione or the two of them, he added a sketch of Hermione's hand, wearing her ring.

They were nearly to Ottery St. Catchpole by the time Harry was done. He finished the sketch by signing the back with a small 'HP'. Then he very carefully detached the sheet from the pad and passed it to Ginny.

"Go on Gin, give it to him."

Ginny looked at the sketch for a moment, then tapped Ron on the shoulder. When Ron turned away from the window to look curiously at his sister, she handed him the drawing. He glanced down at the sketch and his hands trembled for a moment.

He very carefully placed the sketch in his lap and grabbed his sister in a hug. "Give Harry a hug for me and thank him," he whispered fiercely in her ear.

Molly watched his very uncharacteristic display of brotherly affection and decided she'd find out later what this was all about.

A short while later they arrived at the Burrow. From the outside there was no damage visible from the Christmas attack. The real noticeable difference was the security, which made Harry curious.

"Arthur, you have three full time protective service people on duty here at the Burrow?"

This caused the MPS man riding with them to turn around in his seat.

"How did you know there are three MPS guards on duty?" He asked.

"We can see them Sir. Three of them in invisibility cloaks, right Gin?" Harry replied.

Ginny nodded vigorously. "I see them too. One by the gate, one next to the tree..." Then she pouted, "Harry, where's the third one? I can't spot him."

"He's next to the front door. He's using a cloak and a camouflage charm, that's why he's harder to spot."

The MPS man in the front seat frowned. They prided themselves on being unobserved. But then, the Minister had told him once the Weasleys had their family home from school, things might get interesting.

Ron, Harry, and Ginny made beelines straight for their rooms once they got home. Harry changed out of his uniform into a comfortable pair of slacks and t-shirt, then headed back downstairs to the living room. On the way, he bumped into Ron coming out of his own room. Ron stopped him, looking very embarrassed.

"Harry, um... well thanks mate. For the picture."

"It's no big deal. She'll be here soon, and you can still owl her. In the meantime, can I make one little suggestion? Just to irritate 'Mione?" He grinned as he said that.

"What?"

"Think about this Ron. She's going to be spending her time thinking that she's going to arrive here and spend the next month pounding on you to get your summer homework done. If you and I were to finish our homework before she arrives... well let's just say I would think you'd be able to find other things to do with Hermione," he suggested.

This was an alien concept, totally alien. Summers were for fun, not homework, besides, what else could he do with Hermione... A light bulb went off in Ron's head and he grinned at Harry.

"Ron all we need to do is set aside a little time each day, say an hour after every meal. By middle of July, we should be done with all our homework. We'd still have most of the day to goof off."

"I'm starting to like this idea Harry...a lot!" Ron grinned broadly.

With that plan firmly in mind, they continued downstairs and into the kitchen.

Like most wizarding families, the kitchen was probably the most important room in the house. Since very few wizards availed themselves of muggle artifacts like television, the living room was generally reserved for quiet conversation or reading, while the kitchen was where most of the family gathered.

Molly had expanded the size of the kitchen when it was rebuilt. The large family sized cauldron still had a new gleam to it, and the larger pantries with their preservation charms could hold even more food than before.

With Arthur's job change at the ministry came a large increase in salary, which meant that Molly could be a little more generous in filling those pantries.

When Ron and Harry entered the kitchen, Molly, with Ginny's help, was already getting dinner ready. Ron, being Ron, sat at the table to watch. Harry asked Molly if he could help. He was, after all, fairly good in the kitchen. This startled Molly. While male participation in the making of meals was not unheard of in the wizard world, it was practically nonexistent in the Weasley Family.

She set him peeling and cutting potatoes, while she and Ginny went back to their own preparations. Personally, she approved of any man willing to help in the making of the family meal. The last time Arthur had tried, when she was pregnant with Ginny, they'd lived on cold sandwiches for nearly a month.

Ginny nudged Molly and nodded in Harry's direction. She frowned. Harry was peeling the potatoes expertly enough, but he was doing it the muggle way!

She leaned down to Ginny and whispered, "We'll have to show him how over the summer, but I'm not going to stop him from helping. Any man willing to lend a hand in the kitchen is a gem."

After dinner, Harry and Ginny went out to walk the property, holding hands. She showed him some of her favorite places where she grew up. As the day turned into night, they ended up back behind the shed where Harry had once appeared to her last summer as Wings.

Harry pulled her close, wrapping his arms tightly around her. "I think I like this spot best of all. My new life started here, with you in my arms."

She melted against him as they kissed. Soon they reluctantly stopped and headed back to the house.

An Evening with Molly and Mum...

As the evening wound down, Ron and Ginny both went up to their rooms, while Harry sat in the living room with Molly and Arthur. Harry realized that he had one very important piece of unfinished business he needed to discuss with the adult Weasleys.

"Molly, Arthur? Can I talk to you for a moment?"

Molly looked up from her knitting. "Yes dear?"

"I'd like to show you both something. I probably should have shown it to you earlier, but it just never seemed like we had the time when we were home."

This piqued their curiosity. Arthur looked up from his paper. "What would you like to show us, Harry?"

"At the beginning of last summer, Jack Parsons and I snuck to Diagon Alley so he could get some chocolate frogs. I needed to go to Gringots to get some galleons and he needed to change his muggle money into galleons. In Gringots, the goblin taking me to my vault made a mistake and took me to the Potter family vault instead of my trust vault. I didn't stay long in the vault, just long enough to scoop up some galleons and grab a small box that was addressed to me.

"Inside the box was a book written by my Father, Sirius and Remus. And a very special letter.

"The letter was enchanted by my mother. When I first opened it, it was blank. Then, slowly, words started to appear, almost as if she were writing it to me right then and there. I've spoken with Professor Flitwick and he told me my mother was probably one of the few witches he knew of that would be capable of such a thing. He said it was very advanced magic.

"I'd like to show you the letter, but I wanted you to understand parts of it are actually in response to what I was thinking, so it may seem a little disjointed. I want to share it with you because, in a way, they are still talking to me. This past year, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Luna and Neville bought a locket for me to keep the letter in, and it's given me several warnings over the year. If you remember at Christmas, right before the attack, I got a warning from the locket. That's how I knew trouble was coming.

"I think my parents and you would have been friends. With them gone, this is really the only way I can introduce you to them."

Molly and Arthur moved over to sit with Harry on the couch. His explanation had them really curious now.

Harry reached up behind to the back of his neck and fumbled with the clasp. It wasn't easy for him to open it with his hand still sensitive. Finally getting it open, he gently placed the locket on the table and tapped the locket once with his wand. Like a Pensieve, the letter appeared, hovering above the locket. It expanded until it was easily readable.

Molly started sniffling early on in reading the letter, even Arthur's eyes misted up with tears.

Harry waited, watching them both for signs that they had finished reading, when Molly gasped. Harry turned back to the letter. The letters had scrolled up and new writing was appearing in the gap at the bottom, in that same feminine script.

Harry love,

We've been waiting for you to show this letter to Arthur and Molly. What took you so long? We had expected you to show them this letter the same night you asked them for Ginny's hand. Your father is, by the way, quite insufferable about you picking another red head, but even I have to admit, you and Ginny were fated to be together.

Molly, Arthur, words cannot express the gratitude that James, Sirius and I have for what you've done for our Harry. I was so grateful he had you to hold him after Cedric's death and so many times since. I know you would have taken him from those muggles much sooner if you could. You two have opened your home and your hearts to him and for that we are deeply grateful. We also know how important Ginevra is to you both. Take comfort from the fact that their relationship was destined to happen long before either were born.

Molly, Fabian and Gideon send their love. They are very proud of their nephews and their niece and say they always knew you would do well.

Lily Potter

Harry sat back stunned. "That wasn't there the last time!" He gasped out. "That's new!"

The three of them sat in silence for a while, then the image above the locket wavered and collapsed. Arthur picked up the locket and handed it to Harry.

"Don't lose it Harry. I can think of few things more precious than this," he said softly.

Molly was sobbing softly next to Harry. She dabbed her eyes with her apron. "Arthur, did you see? Fabian and Gideon!" Suddenly she engulfed Harry in a massive hug.

Arthur let them hug for a moment before he coughed politely. "I think a cup of tea might be in order?"

The three stood and moved into the kitchen, where Molly made them some tea. Harry still clutched his locket in his hand. The new addition to his letter puzzled him. There were pieces of it that he didn't understand. He fumbled with the locket chain for a bit, then Molly spotting his trouble and pushed his hands away.

"Here let me do that, dear. We don't want you losing that locket."

"Thank you Molly. Did that last part make sense to you? Who are Fabian and Gideon?"

Molly sat the table, twisting her apron in her hands for a long moment. "They were my brothers. They died very early in the first war with Voldemort. Even before we knew there was another Dark Lord. I was still dating Arthur at the time. I was about your age. One night they just never came home. To get a message, even second hand like that, is so special Harry."

Arthur broke in at that point. "Now I understand why you've had so many problems with Dumbledore this past year Harry. I can't say I understand the magic behind it, but it's very powerful, and very personal. I take it the first part of the letter was what nudged you to start taking an interest in Ginny?"

"Oh no Arthur. All the letter did was force me to admit what I was trying to deny. Since my fifth year I've known she was there. I guess I was just fooling myself."

He paused for a moment, before lowering his voice and continuing. "Before I found the letter, I was pushing Ron and Hermione away. Ginny too. When Dumbledore told me the prophecy's full contents, I decided to keep them at a distance. That way they couldn't get hurt. I was wrong about that, I guess. It may come down to Voldemort and I in the end, but I need help getting to that point."

Arthur and Molly both shivered at the mention of Voldemort's name, and the idea of Harry having to face him.

"I don't know how you can say that so casually Harry," Arthur whispered.

Harry looked at Arthur with a haunted expression. "Do I have any choice Arthur? If I don't, everything we have will be lost. Everyone I love will die in this war. Maybe not at once, but it will happen." He looked out the darkened kitchen window for a moment before continuing. "He's out there, waiting for me, and he knows we'll have to meet soon."

His voice trailed off and he sat staring into the blackness, his thoughts in some dark place.

Molly broke his melancholy reverie, changing the subject. "Well you're not meeting him tonight young man! Ginny told me about your wonderful drawings. Perhaps tomorrow you could show them to me? Do you have enough drawing paper and pencils to continue through the summer? I'd love to see what sort of drawings you can do around here."

With the mood lightened, they talked for a while longer before Harry decided to turn in for the night. He gave Molly a goodnight kiss and went up to his bedroom. The two adults watched him leave.

Somewhere in England, Location unknown...

Voldemort sat brooding in his chamber. His defeat at Hogsmeade had dealt a major blow to his forces and it was forcing him to re-evaluate his entire strategy. Wormtail was off on assignment for him, arranging to bring in fresh forces. But even Voldemort had to admit, at this point he was dreadfully weak.

His servants had been unable to find out exactly what had happened in Hogsmeade. Only one thing was clear. They had been winning, and suddenly Potter appeared on the battlefield and he was defeated.

POTTER!

As usual, the very thought of Potter made him check his link to the boy. In the past six months the link had been fuzzy, indistinct, as if it were smothered. But today that wasn't the case. Today the link was clean and clear!

Ruthlessly he struck out...

The Burrow...

Molly was just passing Harry's room when she heard a heavy thud of something hitting the floor and a whimpering sound. Cautiously, she opened the door and peered into the room. She knew Harry had just taken his morning shower and she didn't want to intrude on his privacy.

Harry lay on the floor, his towel still loosely wrapped around his waist and both hands clenched to his forehead.

"Harry!" She exclaimed and rushed to his side. She knelt down beside him, then pulled him up to her, but she wasn't sure what else to do.

Ginny, hearing her mother's cry, came rushing into the room. She took the scene in with a glance. Running to his nightstand she grabbed the pot of salve off the stand, then hurried over to Molly and Harry.

"Mum, grab his hands! I can't put this on with his hands in the way."

She scooped out a small dab of the salve and waited while Molly pulled his hands away. As soon as they were clear, she rubbed the salve onto scar. Almost immediately, Harry shuddered and went limp, his eyes closed.

Ginny relaxed. "He'll be ok in a few minutes. Mrs. Snape, er... I mean, Professor Snape, made this salve, which blocks Voldemort from causing Harry pain. It's easily washed off, though. He mustn't have had time enough to put some more on after he got out of the shower."

Molly eyed the small pot gratefully. "Is that all he has? It doesn't look like a lot. And why are your fingers green?"

"It doesn't take much Mum, just a small dab to cover the scar. But Professor Snape gave him several pots of the salve to carry him through the summer. My fingers are green because the salve is made specifically for Harry. The Professor said something about pH balances causing a skin color change in anyone else who touches the stuff."

Harry blinked his eyes and looked around, confused. Molly was holding him, he was sitting on the floor, Ginny was kneeling next to him, and the towel around his waist was really, really loose!

Molly smiled down at him. "Harry, dear, are you feeling better?"

"I'm just a little woozy, but I'll be fine Molly." Ginny could sense his discomfit and started to giggle. He shot her a glare.

"Oh Harry, lighten up. Mum's raised six boys, she's seen it all before."

Molly carefully released her hold on Harry and stood up. "Well I think we should leave him to finish getting dressed Ginny. When you're dressed, come down to the kitchen, Harry."

Somewhere in England, Location unknown...

Voldemort flew into a rage. He had the link open and it slammed shut. Now it was back to being muffled and indistinct again. How dare Potter defy him like this!

He spat. POTTER! Enough! It was time once and for all to find out what was the secret of his protection!

"Send for that Irish sneak, Murphy. I would speak with him!"

One of his servants rushed from the room to send the summons.

The Burrow...

Harry walked into the kitchen, still a little shaken by the attack, but otherwise fine. Ginny and Ron were seated at the table, having their breakfast.

"Harry, are you feeling better now dear?" Molly asked him, concerned.

"Yes Molly. Ginny got the salve on pretty quick."

"Well dear, sit and have some breakfast. I've already given these two their chores. I'll have you go with Ginny today when she goes into town. But I can assure you young man, tomorrow you'll have your own chores to do."

"Oh that's alright Molly. I don't mind doing the work. But I've managed to convince Ron to spend an hour after every meal with me, doing our summer assignments. Would you mind? I think if we did them a few hours a day, we'd be done before the end of next month. I think it's going to be necessary. I know there are people who are going to want to talk with us over the summer."

Molly froze. Ron doing his homework early? Molly smiled to herself. If I knew Harry could convince Ron to do his summer homework like this, I would have insisted on his living with us much earlier, she thought to herself.

"Actually, I like the sound of that Harry. An hour after every meal is fine by me," she said, smiling at him.

"Ginny's the lucky one this summer, no homework for her," Harry replied, smirking at Ginny, who stuck her tongue out at him.

Later, he and Ginny walked into Ottery St. Catchpole. It wasn't an impressive community by any means. It had a small, discrete Wizarding population, but was largely muggle in makeup. The town itself was small, only a few stores, a grocer, a farmers market, a movie theater, a feed store and a few other shops.

The theater gave Harry an idea, so he carefully noted the viewing times as he passed it.

Ginny pulled Harry into a shop that looked like a muggle shop, until he noted some of the signs were moving. He helped her pick out some of the vegetables that Molly didn't grow in her garden, along with some other items.

The pair walked back to the Burrow, holding hands.

Later that day, with Molly's permission, Harry placed a firecall to Remus, asking him to change enough galleons into muggle money that he'd have about fifty pounds. Remus called back an hour later and handed Harry his money with a grin. He had an idea why Harry was asking for it.

Ginny was out in the garden picking some vegetables, leaving Molly and Harry alone in the kitchen.

"Molly would it be all right if I took Ginny to a movie tonight?"

Molly frowned. "A movie, Harry? What is a movie?"

"It's a form of Muggle entertainment, quite a lot of fun really. I know Ginny's never seen one before, and I think she'd really enjoy it. There's a movie theater in town. We could easily make the 7pm movie and be back before 10pm."

"Hmmm... I don't know Harry..." Seeing the disappointment on his face she added, "How about you ask Arthur over dinner? He knows about muggle stuff. I don't really know much about them. If he agrees, then it would be ok."

Later at dinner Harry tried again, but this time with results he didn't quite expect. Although considering Arthur, he really should have.

"Arthur?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Would be ok if I took Ginny to the movies tonight?"

"A movie? A MUGGLE MOVIE?"

"Er... yes. There's a cartoon playing in town. I thought, since Ginny has never been to the movies, she might enjoy this."

Ginny was watching the conversation intently. She wasn't sure exactly what Harry was talking about...a movie? But it sounded interesting. And what was a cartoon?

"A car tune, Harry? Is that some sort of singing car thing?"

"Oh no sir! It's... well it's hard to explain. Going to the movies is something muggles do when they're courting. It's a lot of fun I think, but I've only seen a few movies on TV. This would my first time going to one in the theater."

"Is it safe, Harry?"

"Yes it's quite safe. No danger in going to a movie."

"Well this sounds like jolly good fun! Why don't we all go!"

Harry realized that if this was the only way he'd get to take her, so be it, so he readily agreed. "Sure. I had Remus get me more than enough muggle money."

"Well then its settled! We'll all go! This is going to be fascinating!"

"I think I'll stay here. I want to write a letter to Hermione tonight Dad," Ron said.

"Good enough, Ron"

And so Harry found himself walking down the road, hand in hand with Ginny, while her parents walked two steps behind. He sighed inwardly, but Ginny seemed so pleased to be doing something different, that maybe taking Ginny and her parents on their first real date wouldn't turn out to be too bad.

Once at the theater, he bought the tickets, then stopped at the concession stand and purchased four large drinks and two large tubs of popcorn. Ginny's eyes bulged when she saw the size of the tub of popcorn he handed to her. He grinned at her reaction. Leading them into the theater itself, he selected two seats for himself and Ginny. Molly and Arthur picked two seats right behind them. The house lights were still on, and the theater was nearly empty.

Ginny looked around. She didn't understand what was going on. She was sitting in a seat facing a big blank white wall.

Harry chuckled to himself. Arthur was trying to look in every direction at once, and Molly was sure that something bad was going to happen. He had to say something.

"It's all right Molly. In a little while, the lights will turn off and the white wall will have pictures on them. This movie is part comedy, part drama, and part love story. This movie company makes pictures for kids a lot younger than us to watch."

To be honest, Harry ended up getting more enjoyment out of watching the reaction of his family than the movie itself. Ginny sat wide-eyed through the entire movie, almost mesmerized by the story unfolding before her, every few seconds she reach down for some popcorn. Both she and Molly started sniffling when the heroine died and sniffled some more when the hero saved her from the underworld and the clutches of the evil villain.

Arthur kept muttering, "Fascinating!" under his breath.

When the movie finally ended and the house lights came back on, all three shook themselves like they were coming up from a trance. Ginny was surprised to see she had eaten most of her popcorn without even knowing it!

Outside the theater, Harry was surprised when first Molly, then Ginny, hugged him and thanked him for taking them to see it. He was also surprised to find that, as they walked back to the Burrow, both of them were humming tunes from the movie.

As the week progressed, things settled into a comfortable routine. Harry had been lucky enough to not experience any more attacks by Voldemort. He and Ron worked on their homework, he did the chores Molly asked of him and took long walks with Ginny. It was, to Harry, perfect.

The Meeting at Grimmauld Place...

A week later Harry, Ron and Ginny met with Remus and some others at Grimmauld Place. Molly was off delivering dispatches for the Order. This was to be the first meeting with Kingsley Shacklebolt. Harry had asked specifically that Professor Dumbledore and Professor Snape attend, as well as getting his squib friend, Jack Parsons, to come.

They all filed into the Order's conference room. With the exception of Harry's friends and Remus, everyone was a little startled by the presence of Jack, and they weren't sure what to make of him. Harry waited for everyone to sit before he started to speak.

"Director Shacklebolt has asked us here to help him address the issue of rebuilding the Auror force. That's why I've invited my good friend Jack Parsons here. In a few moments, I'll turn this meeting over to him, but I'd like to give you a little background on him first. Jack is an American, a squib. His father was a wizard, his mom a muggle. When Jack's mum died when he was young, his dad turned his back on the American wizarding world. As a result, Jack grew up knowing about the Wizarding world, but was out of touch with it for many years until he and I became friends last summer. Jack is a former member of the American muggle military, and many of the things he taught me I incorporated into the training of the DA."

Harry refused to use the name Potter's Companions, despite it having become nearly universally accepted.

"I asked him here today because it was his methods and ideas I used, clumsily I might add, and probably improperly. Jack is not a wizard, but he represents a source of knowledge that I feel we need desperately. I ask each of you to listen to him, get to know him, and remember that the victory at Hogsmeade came from the use of muggle knowledge. I'll also add that, other than speaking funny, he's really an ok bloke."

Harry smirked at Jack with that last comment. Jack chuckled and struggled for a moment with his cane, before standing up.

"Thanks kid. I'll see Santa gets ya an extra large lump of coal this year." Looking around, Jack continued. "I ain't one for pretty speeches, so I'll cut right to the chase. Mr. Shacklebolt, you're barking up the wrong tree with your mission."

Seeing the puzzled looks, Jack tried another approach.

"What I mean is, you train Aurors, which are wizarding world versions of muggle policemen. Policemen are trained to capture, trained to use deadly force as a last resort. One of the reasons why Harry's group was so effective was because they went into that battle, ready to kick ass... I mean they went into that battle using spells that would wound, maim and kill. Not capture, not stun, but kill."

"Society needs policemen, they capture bad guys. But they don't use policemen to fight wars. Wars are fought by armies, soldiers trained to follow orders and trained to use deadly force as their primary tool. Mr. Shacklebolt, what you need to ask yourself is, do you want policemen, or do you want soldiers? Harry's action in Hogsmeade illustrates quite clearly the differences between the two, and explains why he had so few casualties and you had so many."

Seeing confused looks from many in the room, Jack barked, "Harry!"

"What?" Harry asked, startled.

"How many spells did you have in your spell set that would be considered non-lethal?"

"Well, discounting medical, shields and diversionary spells, every spell we used could be considered lethal, depending on where it hit a target. I'd say eighty percent of our spells could be considered lethal without prompt medical attention."

Jack nodded approvingly before turning back to Shacklebolt and the rest. "That's the problem in a nutshell, gentlemen. You can create an army, or you can make policemen. Harry created his army in less than a year, on the sly, under everyone's nose. And he didn't even do it full time!"

Shacklebolt sat there for a long moment thinking before he began to speak. "I can certainly see the sense in what you're saying. This is something I'm going to have to discuss with the Minister. It's a lot different than what we're used to. On the other hand, the Minister has shared with me information concerning when and

where the next big attack is bound to occur. Information which Professor Dumbledore here has provided. Training up the force needed to defeat that attack isn't going to be easy."

Harry broke in at that point. "Director Shacklebolt, you won't be alone in this. I fully expect to be able to put over one hundred, possibly as many as one hundred and fifty people into the field."

Kingsley smiled. "Harry, I think you and the other kids have done more than your fair share..."

"No Sir!" Harry cut him off. "Understand this. The DA will be there. I wish they didn't have to be, but they will. As will I."

"I don't think you understand, Mr. Potter," Shacklebolt began, looking annoyed.

"You're the one who doesn't understand," Harry said firmly. "Let me ask you a simple question, Mr. Shacklebolt. Can you kill Voldemort?"

Kingsley straightened in his chair, saying, "I'm sure once the Auror force is rebuilt, we could take Voldemort and his followers out."

"Really?" Harry asked. "Then why haven't you? Why are my parent's dead? Why do I have this scar? Why was Hermione's home attacked last Christmas? How many muggles have died?"

As Shacklebolt stared at Harry in disbelief, he continued. "You can't kill Voldemort, no matter how many Aurors you throw at him. You may be able to take out his Death Eaters, but the Dark Lord will remain. Without the DA and me, you'll lose this war. If you don't believe me, ask Professor Dumbledore."

Shacklebolt looked startled and glance at Dumbledore.

"Tell him!" Harry hissed at Dumbledore.

Dumbledore closed his eyes for a long moment.

"There is a prophecy which Harry, myself and perhaps a few others in this room know of. But I'm sure you do not Kingsley. A Seeress, who has already had at least one additional prophecy in this matter come to pass, made it shortly before Harry's birth. Listen.

"...The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies..."

"All of these fights, the pitched battle in Hogsmeade, what will come at Hogwarts, it all boil down to one inescapable conclusion. Harry will have to face Voldemort, one on one, probably at Hogwarts, and only one will leave that field alive. It is his right, his destiny. You may be in charge of the Aurors, but he's the one leading this fight."

Ginny always flinched when she heard about the prophecy. The thought of Harry not surviving was too brutal for her to bear. She grabbed Harry's hand and held it tightly in her own. Hearing it again shot an arrow of fear through her heart. She knew, sooner or later, she was going to have to spill her fears to someone. But without Hermione here, that left only her Mum.

Kingsley stared at Harry, his expression wavering between shock and awe. "Does the Minister know about this, Professor Dumbledore?"

"Yes. I told her about it shortly after she took office."

Jack stumped his way around the table to Harry and placed his hand on his shoulder. "Kid... Harry, I'm sorry. Whatever you need, asked. If it's in my power, I'll do it."

Harry eyed the lanky American carefully, and then said, "I'm glad to hear that Jack, because if I can get the Professor's permission, I'd like to offer you a job."

Dumbledore leaned forward. This was something new and interesting. "What do you have in mind, Harry?"

"Professor, Jack here isn't a wizard, and I know that's a problem, but he's the closest thing we have to a professional strategist. He would be invaluable in advising us regarding defense of Hogwarts. He would also be useful in helping us train up the DA to a higher standard."

"Yes, I can see that. I think we can make an exception to the rules, and even offer him apartment space at Hogwarts. It would certainly be easier than arranging transportation back and forth. Mr. Parsons?"

Dumbledore asked, turning to Jack. "Would you be interested in helping us?"

Jack smiled widely. "Me? Let me tell ya, I wouldn't miss this for all the bourbon in Kentucky! Where do I sign up?"

Dumbledore winced, while Harry snickered. "That's a 'Yes' Professor. He's got a colorful way of speaking, but you'll get used to it."

Turning serious, Harry said, "Sir, there is one other issue which I'd like to bring up with you. I don't have a solution for you, but it concerns me greatly, and I think it's something you will need to discuss with the Minister and the Board of Governors..."

Dumbledore flinched slightly at that and wondered what club Harry was going to beat him with this time.

"It's the issue of the NEWTS Sir. As I see it, training this year is going to take more time than last year. But it's a NEWT year for many of the DA members, including myself. I don't see how we can train to defend the castle and study for NEWTS at the same time."

"Ah. Well Harry, I had anticipated that this possibility might arise. The teachers and I are trying to arrange a schedule, which should give you at least five hours per day of regular schooling, as well as four hours for your training. I will, of course, discuss this matter with both the Minister and the Board of Governors. I'm sure we can make arrangements for something suitable, even if it means delaying the NEWTS for a few months."

Harry smiled at Dumbledore, and then turned back to Jack. "I realize that you can't just up and quit your job right away, and even if you could, no one will be at the school until September. If you speak with the Headmaster, he can make arrangements with you to arrive a few days early, to familiarize yourself with the castle. In the meantime, I'll have Remus open up a Gringots account for you to draw from. I'm afraid you'll be well immersed in the wizarding world by the time we're done with this."

Jack chuckled before replying, "Sure thing kid. Heck, I might even like it enough to stick around after this is over, especially if I find me a nice witch. One almost as pretty as your little redhead."

Ginny blushed. She wasn't too sure about this strange man. He seemed nice, but it was hard to tell and he talked so strange!

Harry laughed at her reaction. "As long as she doesn't use a bat bogey hex on you, you're all right, Jack." Harry looked around the table before adding, "Does anyone else have any business they would like to discuss?"

Dumbledore peered over his glasses. "I have one final thing I would like to add Harry. When Miss Granger returns from her holiday, I would like for you all to visit me at Hogwarts. I have something that will interest all of you, but her the most, I think."

Harry nodded agreeably to that. The meeting broke up shortly afterwards.

Somewhere in England, Location unknown....

Voldemort sat in his chamber pondering his plans when a servant scurried in and groveled at his feet.

"Well? Speak dog or I will kill you here and now!" He snarled.

"My lord, the Irishman, Murphy, is here as you requested."

"Send him in now!"

Voldemort leaned back in his chair. Murphy was not a Death Eater, not a servant. Not yet at any rate. And he represented a powerful, illegal cartel among the wizard community of Ireland. Voldemort had, upon occasion, hired their services. Some day soon, he promised himself, he would absorb their cartel into his organization, but not today. Today was a day for business.

Murphy walked into the room. Unlike his servants, the man did not grovel. Voldemort had to suppress the urge to Crucio him right then and there. Instead, he adopted a more conciliatory tone.

"Ah, Mr. Murphy, so kind of you to come. I have need of information and your organization is noted for its abilities in that particular area," he said.

"Ah 'tis kind of ye to say so m'lord. Now, how can we be of service to ya?" Replied Murphy.

"There is a boy living near Ottery St. Catchpole. He has managed to block my penetration of his mind by doing something to a very noticeable scar on his forehead. I want you to find out what he's doing."

"Seems simple enuff, m'lord. I be settin' one o' my people on it. We'll find out what Potter is doin'."

Voldemort hissed at the mention of that name. Murphy's lips twitched briefly.

"As ya said yourself m'lord, we are noted for findin' out things," Murphy said.

"Quite so Mr. Murphy. You'll receive your usual compensation when you have news for me," the Dark Lord said, sounding bored.

"Fair enuff, m'lord. I best be on me way then, I've got work to do for ya."

Murphy tilted his head in gesture of respect and walked from the room.

Voldemort's hands twitched as he glowered at the retreating man's back.

Later that night, back in the Burrow...

Harry and Ron were already asleep when Molly checked on them. She knew they were well past the age where she needed to treat them like small children, but old habits died hard. No matter what age they were, she'd always consider them her boys.

Molly paused outside Ginny's door. A faint light shone from under the door and there were sounds coming from the room. She cracked open the door and saw Ginny sitting up on her bed, her knees pulled tight to her chest. She was crying softly.

Molly walked in and sat on the bed. Ginny looked up at her, her eyes filled with a kind of pain Molly hadn't seen since the summer after Harry had rescued her from the chamber.

Molly reached over and pulled her daughter into a hug. "Ginny, what's the matter, love? You can tell me."

"Mum, I'm so scared. What if he doesn't live through the battle? I'm afraid I'm going to lose him. I try to hide it from him, but at night, like this, I can't hold it back. I know we agreed to wait until I graduate, but by then he could be dead! I don't want to wait because if I do, I may never know what it would be like to love him, mum! I don't know what to do anymore."

There it was, out in the open at last. It was the same fear that had been gnawing at Molly ever since Christmas. She was afraid for Harry, and terrified for Ginny.

Molly looked at her daughter and saw the woman she was growing into. Her eyes misted over with tears, but she said softly, "You be strong for him, Ginny. He needs you and your love. His love for you is so powerful. He'll win Ginny. He'll win because he's fighting for you. But you need to follow your heart. While I'm not going to tell you to give yourself to him, I'm not going to forbid it either. Have faith in him. He'll survive the fight because of you. You give him the strength no one else can. I believe, in the end, he'll spend the rest of his life giving you his heart. I always felt you two were meant to be together."

Ginny looked up at her Mum and gave her a weak smile. "Thanks. I knew I could talk to you about this."

Molly kissed her on the forehead and brushed away her tears. "Of course you can, love. We're all afraid for him. But I refuse to believe he was born into this world to suffer so much only to be killed by that monster. He'll win and then you'll both give me lots of beautiful, green-eyed grandchildren to spoil."

Molly helped Ginny get under the blankets, and then brushed her hair back out of her eyes. For the first time since that terrible summer after the chamber, Molly sat on the bed, humming, until her daughter fell asleep.

Another Vision...

Harry woke to a soft, barely audible, melodic sound. He sat up, put his glasses on, and looked around. Glancing out the window, he could see the moon as it slowly dropped behind a hill in the distance.

The moon suddenly flared brightly and Harry was elsewhere. And he wasn't in his phoenix form this time.

It was a chamber of some sort, but there were no visible doors or windows. In the center of the chamber, above a raised platform, floated an exquisite crystal, the likes of which he had never seen before.

Harry stared at the crystal. He could almost see its structure, its every flaw. As it floated there, slowly rotating, it flickered with a faint light. It was a strange light, almost dark in nature, and it made Harry uneasy. It seemed alien to the crystal, but also a part of it. The more he watched it, the more troubled he became.

Again the light flared. When it cleared, he was standing in a familiar place. He was near a small, thatched cottage. Nearby was a pond. Seeing the smoke still rising from the chimney, Harry smiled and decided to pay the old man another visit.

The door opened and a merry voice from within called to him. "Come in, my boy. I'm so pleased to see you again!"

Harry entered the simple room and sat at the table across from the old man.

"Hello Sir. I had hoped we'd meet again."

"Well Harry, I did tell you we would, didn't I?" Asked the jolly old fellow.

"Yes Sir, you did. May I ask who you are?"

"Names, names! Why people attach importance to such trivial matters is beyond me. Let me say this. I am but a guide, Harry. At this point of your life, I'm here to nudge you along in the right direction, as I have nudged others, for longer than I'd like to remember."

"What you saw before you came here is a little clue for you. If you get stuck, give it to your witches to ponder.

"You've done very well, Harry. Very well indeed! And I don't think you've realized it just yet, so let me be the one to break the news to you my boy. You, and you alone, engineered the collapse of your first vision!"

The old man laughed and slapped his knee with an infectious glee that even had Harry smiling. He was just so happy!

"Bet you hadn't figured that out yet, did you my boy?"

Harry was at a loss. It hadn't been him. It had been the DA who'd done it!

"No Harry, there would have been no DA without you. They wouldn't have been so loyal to the cause without you. It was all your effort. The DA had its role to play and still does, but it is your creation, your work."

Harry was stunned. Could the man read his mind too? Harry pondered his words carefully and, as he did, he felt a new sensation grow in him. It was a feeling alien to him.

He felt good about himself. Harry slowly sat up straighter. If I could make the first vision fail, then I can make the second one fail as well! He thought to himself. I can do this! I must! For Ginny and everyone else!

The old man leapt from his chair with an agility that gave lie to his apparent age and gave a shout. "By all the Gods, he's got it! I'm proud of you Harry. You will do well! You have more to do, but I'm sure you can do it, my boy. Just remember to trust in yourself and in the love of those around you. Your love for your Ginny, and hers for you, is your greatest strength."

The distant bells started to peal like last time, and the room started to brighten slowly.

"Wait! Will I ever see you again?" Harry cried.

The words came to him softly, as if from a great distance, "Perhaps Harry. The future, as you've learned, is malleable."

Harry could have sworn he heard a happy laughter at the end. When the light faded, he was back in his bed, still staring at the moon. He smiled and snuggled down under the blankets for a restful sleep.

The next morning...

Something was different. Molly, Ginny and Ron could see it immediately when Harry walked into the kitchen. He carried himself differently. The fire behind his eyes burned with a sparkling intensity. He smiled at them, wishing them all a good morning. The three watched him warily. This wasn't the normal, sleepy, just-gotten-up Harry.

Ginny eyed him suspiciously. "Harry," she said, gaining his attention. "I know you. Something's happened, hasn't it?"

"Really love? What could have possibly happened?"

She stood up and walked over to him. Narrowing her eyes, she glared at him. It was one of those Weasley women patented glares that said, 'You will do what I tell you to do!' And normally, it worked quite well on Harry.

It didn't work this time. He slid his hands under her arms, picked her up off the floor, spun her around and kissed her soundly before releasing her. She tried to stifle her laughter.

Ron was torn between laughing and making gagging sounds. Molly smiled, watching the two.

Ginny was surprised. Her glare had failed! Not only had it failed, but he had a counter for the glare! A counter-glare! It was unheard of! It wasn't allowed! Harry put his arm around her and guided her back to her seat.

Ginny sat down completely confused. Did Harry just pat my bum? She thought to herself. Sure, Ron and Mum wouldn't have seen it, but he did, didn't he?

Her wandering thoughts were reined in when Harry asked, "Gin, you remember that old man from my vision last year?"

She nodded, bewildered. What did this have to do with him patting her bum?

"Well let's just say that he and I had another chat last night. He told me a few things about myself that I had been trying to deny. What he told me was good Gin, things everyone's been telling me. Things I didn't want to believe. But for some strange reason, I couldn't disbelieve him," he said cheerily. Then he leaned closer to her and whispered in her ear, "I'm going to beat that monster Gin. You can count on it."

She jumped, startled. He'd patted her bum again! No mean trick, since she was still seated!

Her gaze locked with his and, in an instant, she could see the love he felt for her, like it was fueling the fire behind his eyes. His very soul was open before her.

They probably would have sat like that forever had Molly not broken their reverie.

"I don't know about this vision you speak of, but it seems to me that it's done you a world of good, Harry. I must say, you remind me of Bill or Charlie at this point. It's hard to put my finger on, but it's good to see, dear."

Ginny spent the rest of the day in a slightly bemused state. She was used to what she called her 'Harrys'. The angry Harry, and the scared Harry, even the commanding Harry who led them all into battle. This Harry was new to her. She could see all the other Harrys were still there, he was still modest and unfailingly polite, but he seemed surer of himself now. And it showed in the way he walked, the way he carried himself and dealt with others.

Previously, Harry would do something in a muggle way and get all embarrassed about it. Now, he'd laugh it off and ask someone to show him how to do it. He was, in her opinion, still her Harry, only improved. He even seemed to be less embarrassed by public displays of affection. And that was a change she wholeheartedly approved of.

Headmaster's office, early July...

Albus Dumbledore gazed at his desk on this late June morning and sighed. He had a mountain of paperwork to plow through. The changes the Minister was ramming through the Wizengamot were coming fast and furious. She had years of mismanagement and petty policies to undo. Unfortunately for Albus, this translated into tedious paperwork.

He looked out the window and wondered what it would hurt if he were to slip off his shoes and socks and walk barefoot in the grass. Oh to be sure, Minerva would probably see it as another sign of his approaching senility, but it sounded so appealing!

He was startled out his wandering thoughts when the Sorting Hat burst into speech on its shelf.

Shaken, he quickly wrote down what the hat had said and called Minerva on the floor, asking her to bring the Snapes and Professor Flitwick to his office as soon as possible. The hat rarely spoke, except during the sorting ceremony, although it did speak to Harry Potter during his second year.

He had tried to engage the hat in conversation several times over the course of his tenure as Headmaster, but with no results. History had shown that, from time to time, it would speak to a Headmaster. But it hadn't spoken to Dumbledore until now. And what it had to say seemed most ominous.

After a short wait, the staff entered the office and took seats. The Snapes had recently returned from holiday, visiting Serena's sister in the States. Severus looked somewhat strained however, and Dumbledore couldn't decide if he had enjoyed his first real holiday in years or not.

"Ah.. so good of you all to join me today. It seems we have something of a mystery on our hands. A short while ago, the Sorting Hat spoke, unbidden. This is what it had to say."

He waved a slip of parchment in front of them before passing it to Professor McGonagall.

Minerva took the parchment and read:

Hogwarts oh Hogwarts, the time is nigh,
War comes and fire will burn the sky.
The path is clear from four to one must be,
A united Hogwarts the world must see.
And the blade bearer must lead the one,
Else the danger will not be undone. The one must follow the mark,
In this our hour most dark.

She looked up, startled, and then passed the parchment to the other teachers.

Dumbledore waited until they had all read the Sorting Hat's message before continuing. "There isn't a lot that is known about the hat or its making. Legend says Godric Gryffindor made it, shortly before he died, for the purposes of sorting the houses. Some contend that, since the hat has given warnings in the past when the school was threatened, it was much more than a mere sorting device. A few Headmasters have even called the Hat 'The Voice of Hogwarts'.

"What concerns me is that this sounds almost like prophecy. It's a puzzle that I think we all must ponder."

Minerva gasped and paled. "Oh Merlin, Albus. 'From four to one'? You don't think it means Mr. Potter and his friends? That three of them will die? Harry wouldn't survive the loss of his friends. Miss Weasley most of all."

Serena hitched in her breath at that thought and Severus frowned. They sat there for a moment before Dumbledore finally broke their morbid speculation.

"No Minerva, I do not believe the first stanza refers to Harry and his friends. The second stanza does speak clearly about Harry. But the first stanza is the big puzzle. I am unsure as to what it means."

Serena spoke up at that point. "Albus? How does the second stanza refer to Harry?"

Severus answered her question. "In his second year, Harry rescued Miss Weasley from an echo of Voldemort in the Chamber of Secrets. Down in the Chamber, he killed Salazar Slytherin's Basilisk by summoning Godric Gryffindor's sword to him. During the battle, the Basilisk bit him. After killing it, he ripped out the fang that was embedded in his arm and used it to destroy the artifact that was bringing Voldemort back, and draining Miss Weasley of life in the process. The poison would have killed him had it not been for Fawkes, who healed him. The term 'Mark' is probably a reference to Harry as well, because of his scar."

"I never knew about that! Merlin has that child ever had a normal year in this school? And that explains part of Miss Weasley's fierce loyalty to him," Serena said, shaking her head.

"Yes, Harry is clearly the blade bearer. He is the only one I know that can wield that weapon, for it does not allow those it considers unworthy to touch it. Alas, even I cannot wield the sword. As to Miss Weasley's affections for Harry, I'm now convinced that they were destined for each other long before the chamber. But we're getting off topic. I think the first stanza refers to the school itself, but I am unsure just how. I would ask that you each take the time to research this. You would all approach it from different directions and perhaps, between us, we might come up with an answer to it."

Dumbledore paused reflectively before continuing. "You know, it is ironic. This is not the first time in my tenure as Headmaster that I have witnessed the hat speak unbidden. It spoke to Harry in his second year. He questioned it about why the hat had wanted to place him in Slytherin House."

Severus looked startled at that. "I never knew that! Why did the hat place him in Gryffindor then?"

Dumbledore twinkled at him before replying, "Because Harry asked not to be placed in Slytherin. It is no slight to you, Severus. He and Mister Malfoy had developed an instant dislike for each other on their first meeting in Diagon Alley, and he didn't want to be placed in the same house. In many ways, Harry exhibits qualities that would have placed him in any house. He's as brave as a Gryffindor, as loyal as a Hufflepuff, as smart as a Ravenclaw, and he proved last year he could be as sneaky and ruthless as any Slytherin, by building an army right under my nose. Harry would have done well in any of the houses except, perhaps, yours Severus, where he already had enemies waiting for him."

Severus nodded thoughtfully. Then, placing the parchment back on Dumbledore's desk, he duplicated it for the teachers.

"Unless there is something else to discuss, we have some research to do. Thank you all for coming," the Headmaster said, as the teachers rose to leave.

Snape's Quarters, minutes later...

When they entered the apartment, Serena hurried through the living room and went into the library. They had a puzzle to work on, and while she was sure they didn't have any books that would help, it never hurt to check. She'd found stranger things in some of the older volumes, after all.

Conjuring a pot of tea on the desk, she turned to ask Severus to pour, only to find he wasn't in the room with her. Grumbling under her breath, she stalked from the room to round up her wayward husband.

She found him in the living room, staring out a window. He turned as she entered and sent her an unreadable look. Pausing, she watched him walk to the couch and collapse onto a cushion.

"Severus," she called softly. When he didn't reply, she joined him on the couch, albeit with more dignity.

"What's wrong?" She asked, softly.

"Harry," he said simply.

"The prophesy? I know. It's a bit overwhelming, isn't it?"

"That's not what I meant," he said, shortly.

"Then what's bothering you?"

"Harry."

"Yes, yes, I get that. It's about Harry. Is it the Sorting Hat's little puzzle?"

"No."

After a moment of silence, she smacked him in the back of the head.

"Ouch! Serena, what the hell was that for?" He asked her angrily.

"It's easier than playing twenty questions with you, Severus! Either tell me what's bothering you, or I swear I'll smack you again," Serena exclaimed in annoyance.

"Harry, a Slytherin?" Severus said, puzzled.

When Serena simply gaped at him, he sighed in frustration. "Look, I know I'm a prat when it comes to my house, but I'm not sure how to...I mean, he can be sneaky sometimes but...would he...I just..."

"Severus! For Merlin's sake, would you concentrate?"

"What?" He asked with a scowl. "You asked what was wrong, didn't you?"

"Gods, you can be such a ...never mind. Listen. We have a problem. Remember the Sorting Hat? We need to work on that. And you're sitting here worried about whether Harry would have made a good Slytherin? Where has your focus gone? Since we came back from vacation, you've been walking around in a daze. If this keeps up, we're not going on holiday next year!"

"If that means no more trips to your sisters, I'll be sure to restrain my disappointment," Severus muttered sarcastically under his breath.

Unfortunately, she heard him.

"Excuse me?" She asked, in a polite, if chilly tone. "What's wrong with my sister?"

"Nothing," he replied, innocently. When she reached up to smack him in the head again, he caught her hand and glared. "Serena, you have to admit that it wasn't exactly the most relaxing holiday."

"Of course it was," she replied, puzzled. "At least, I thought it was. You didn't enjoy it?"

"Would you enjoy an eight year old following you around, day in and day out, questioning and correcting you?" He asked her in annoyance. "I mean, honestly! Every time I turned around, that bloody child was there. She even burst in to ask questions while I showered!"

When Serena's lips twitched, he squeezed her hand. When she grinned, he growled at her. When the giggles finally started, he pushed her down on the couch and pinned her there with his body.

"And what," he asked silkily, "is so damn funny?"

"You," she chortled. "Severus, you're a teacher. You deal with children every day during term. You know they ask a lot of questions. How else can they learn?"

"You've obviously never sat in on one of my classes," he muttered.

"Alright, I'll admit that Cari can be a bit...loquacious at times. But you have to admit, she's also very bright. We start a child's magical education at a much younger age than the Europeans do. We have to."

"Have to?" He asked.

She rolled her eyes at him. "Have you ever had to explain to a muggle neighbor why your daughter just levitated her playmate out of a pool? Magical children are taught earlier to avoid such things. We don't have a Muggle Relations Department like you Brits do, you know."

"No, actually I didn't know that," he said, a bit sheepish.

"If it isn't British, it isn't worth knowing, is it?" She baited him.

Refusing to take the bait, he kissed her. When he raised his head a few moments later, he grinned in satisfaction. Her dazed, dreamy expression was well worth the argument!

"So, about the Sorting Hat's little puzzle," Severus began.

"What?" Serena asked vaguely, staring at his lips.

"Never mind," he said, narrowing his eyes as she licked her lips. Lowering his head once more, he murmured, "It can wait."

The Burrow, mid July...

Harry padded silently down the corridor from the bathroom to his bedroom, a towel wrapped around his waist. He glanced out his window and smiled. The flowering vines that grew along this side of the house were in full bloom, and insects and birds buzzed from flower to flower.

It's rather relaxing, he thought. I must remember to make a sketch of that today after my chores are done.

Sitting on the bed before getting dressed he grabbed his salve and put a small dab over the scar. It was another blissfully quiet day in the Burrow.

Outside his window, a hummingbird hovered for a moment longer before taking a lazy course away from the Burrow.

Somewhere in England, Location unknown...

Voldemort was bored. He sat in his chamber, occasionally tormenting a servant, but he really had little to do at the moment. Wormtail was off on a mission for him and, for once, the little rat was sending back progress reports, which were positive in nature.

His attention was diverted when a servant scurried forward, fell to his knees and cringed before him.

"Well? Speak dog!" He snarled, his boredom turning instantly to anger.

"My Lord, Mr. Murphy has returned. He begs you to grant him an audience," the man whimpered.

"Send him in at once!"

Suddenly this day was looking up. He might have some fun after all!

Murphy entered his chamber carrying a small object in his hand. He stopped a few feet from Voldemort's chair and nodded his head in a gesture of respect.

"So Mr. Murphy, what have you found out for me?"

"T'was a difficult job, m'lord. We did not know Ministry Protective Services guarded the house, but we managed to sneak in anyway. We discovered that Mr. Potter has been applyin' a salve ta his scar every mornin' after he showers. 'Tis this salve which we feel is preventin' ya from reachin' him. We've also noted that Mr. Potter goes outta his way ta prevent his head from gettin wet, which suggests this salve is easily washed off."

"Most excellent Mr. Murphy! And would your spy be able to tell me when Potter goes in to take his shower?" Voldemort asked, with a greedy glee.

Murphy smiled evilly. "We have anticipated yer request m'lord." He handed Voldemort a small brass bell.

"When the bell rings, it will mean that Potter will be enterin' his shower. We suggest waitin' two or three minutes before ya begin, to allow him ta rinse the salve away."

"You have done exceedingly well Mr. Murphy, exceedingly well indeed! You will be well rewarded for this."

"We are here ta serve, m'lord." Murphy nodded his head at Voldemort and left the room.

Voldemort cackled evilly. Now he need only wait for the bell to ring.

Your mine Potter! I've got you now! He thought.

The Burrow...

The figure in the window never even glanced out. He merely picked up a towel and left the room, never noticing the small humming bird as it darted to a particular flower and shook it vigorously.

Breakfast was nearly over and Harry was no where in sight. Molly frowned. "Ginny, be a dear and go see what's keeping Harry. I heard him wake up. He's going to miss breakfast if he doesn't hurry."

"Ok Mum. I'll light a fire under him."

Molly was serving a second helping to Ron and mentally preparing the dinner menu when she was interrupted by a scream.

"MUM!"

Both Ron and Molly bolted upstairs. They spotted Ginny in the bathroom, struggling to pull a limp form out from under the still flowing shower. Molly turned the water off with her wand.

"Ronald, go floo Professor Dumbledore. We need Madam Pomfrey and Mrs. Snape, if they are available. If not, we need another healer. Step aside, Ginny. I'll levitate him to his bed."

Ron dashed back downstairs.

Molly moved Harry out of the bathroom and into his bedroom. Ginny pulled back the blankets long enough for him to be placed on the bed, before pulling up the sheet to cover his nakedness.

Harry was trembling violently. He had hit his head against the tub when he fell and was bleeding from a bad cut on the back of his head. His eyes were rolled up and his scar bled freely, pulsating an angry red.

Molly used her apron to dab away the blood from the scar, then she quickly applied some of Harry's salve to it. Almost immediately his tremors ceased, but he showed no other signs of rousing.

"RONALD!"

"No need to shout Molly. Poppy, Serena and I are here," Dumbledore said as he walked into the room.
"Might I suggest that we leave the room, while Poppy and Serena see what they can do for Harry?"

They were sitting around the kitchen table twenty minutes later when Poppy and Serena entered. Molly twisted her apron in her hands and looked at the two of them fearfully. Ginny looked almost as frightened.

Poppy smiled at the both of them. "Relax, he'll be fine. He took a nasty bump to the head when he fell in the tub, and he'll have a headache today. Fortunately, there's no sign of concussion. He's sleeping right now, and probably will for another hour or so, but he'll be fine."

Molly leaned back in her chair, limply. "Thank Merlin for that!"

When Ginny sagged in her chair, Dumbledore gestured for Poppy and Serena to sit down.

"Molly tells me that he had another attack a few weeks back, although of much shorter duration. It seems to me that Voldemort may be aware of the salve, and must be probing Harry constantly to see when it's been washed off. There may be a charm that can keep the scar, and the area around it, dry. I will ask Filius to look into this. Perhaps even a modification to the bubblehead charm."

Once the Weasley women were assured that Harry would be fine, the group sat around the table, talking. Ginny asked Professor Snape to recommend a book or two for her to read, since she had no homework this summer.

When student and teacher began discussing various works, Dumbledore sat back, smiling. It was strange to find a studious Weasley. Not that any of them were unintelligent, far from it! The twins had an astounding intellect, when they chose to apply it. But it was rare to see a Weasley child voluntarily read a book. Although, Ginny's always been much different from her brothers, come to think on it, the Headmaster mused.

The creaking of the floorboards above them caused the conversation around the table to halt. Molly rushed out of the kitchen and returned a few minutes later with Harry. He looked paler than usual, but otherwise all right. He grinned at the group around the table, the intensity of the light behind his eyes and the sparkle in them very noticeable. He sat heavily in a chair next to Ginny, his hand automatically seeking hers, while Molly bustled around the kitchen, fixing Harry something to eat.

"How are you feeling, Harry?" Asked Dumbledore.

"I've felt better Sir. But frankly, if he doesn't stop this game playing, I'm going to personally hunt him down and give him a headache he won't forget."

Everyone at the table blinked at him in various degrees of disbelief. Harry had talked about fighting Voldemort before, but never so casually.

Dumbledore leaned forward and looked at Harry intently. Something had changed about him. He exuded a presence now that was clearly noticeable. He caught Harry's gaze, his eyes twinkling merrily. It took a moment for Dumbledore to realize that Harry's eyes were sparkling back at him. Matching him sparkle for twinkle.

Ginny started to giggle as Dumbledore twinkled and Harry sparkled at each other. It was enough to make them both break eye contact.

"I should have warned you Professor. He learned your trick a week or two ago," she said. "He used to have the most intense green eyes and I could stare into them forever. But now..." She sighed before continuing, "It's like looking into them and seeing a reflection of your soul," she said dreamily, eyes closed.

When no one said anything, Ginny opened her eyes. Madam Pomfrey and Professor Snape were grinning at her. Professor Dumbledore smiled benignly while Molly sniffed tearfully into her apron. Harry looked at her as if she'd gone bonkers.

Mentally reviewing what she'd just said, she blushed three shades of scarlet. "What I meant to say was....his eyes...they...well, it's different...see..."

Harry leaned over, kissed her forehead and quietly suggested she stop sputtering before she choked on her foot.

"Harry, something's obviously happened. Can you tell me what it was?" Dumbledore asked, as Ginny sent him a grateful look for changing the subject.

"Professor, do you remember that vision of the old man? He and I had another talk about two weeks back. He told me things I'd been denying to myself for a long time, and pointed out certain truths. I can show you the vision in a Pensieve sometime. He didn't have much information concerning our problem though. It was a personal chat. When I woke up, I could feel there had been another power increase, and my eyes were like this. Ginny likes them, so I'm not going to worry about it."

Serena seemed startled by Harry's gaze. "I see what you mean, Ginny. You better be prepared to fight them off with a stick, next term. Those eyes of his are going to drive every girl, from the first to the seventh years, crazy."

"She'll have a bigger stick Professor. I'm replacing her ring with an engagement ring on her next birthday. Unless she's changed her mind and hasn't told me," he said with a grin.

Ginny smacked him on his arm and grabbed him by an ear, pulling him down to eye level. "You're mine Potter, and don't you forget it!" She snarled at him, and then she smoothed his hair.

"Going for the other foot, love?" Harry asked her.

She wasn't sure what he was talking about until she heard Madam Pomfrey.

"Ferocious little thing, isn't she?" The medi-witch asked blandly.

"A bit violent too," Serena said, stifling a snicker. "That young man's ears are going to be a foot longer before school starts, if he isn't careful around her."

Ginny groaned as she felt a blush once again heat her cheeks. Gods, she really needed to pay attention! It's all Harry's fault! Ginny thought. With him around, is it any wonder I can't think?

Harry chuckled at her, then turned back to Professor Dumbledore. "Seriously Sir, the only piece of information that wasn't aimed at me personally in that vision involved a new crystal type I've never seen before. At the moment, I have no idea what it does."

Harry pulled out a sketchpad from his pocket and enlarged it. Flipping it over to a particular page, he handed the sketch to Dumbledore. The Headmaster gazed at the image thoughtfully. It was a crystal all right, and Harry had drawn it from multiple angles. The back of the page contained notes and his observations on it, along with some guesses as to its chemical makeup.

"It was one of the most beautiful crystals I've even seen Sir," Harry continued. "But it flickered oddly with a disturbing dark light. I don't think the light was natural to the stone, and it made me uneasy to look at it. The old man told me that if I got too stumped by it, I should turn the puzzle over 'my witches', which I presume to mean Ginny and Hermione. You can make a copy of that page if you want. Maybe you can dig something up on it as well."

Dumbledore made two copies of the sketch and passed the book over to Poppy, who wanted to see if Harry had followed her advice.

Harry looked somewhat ashamed as he watched Madam Pomfrey look through his book.

"I'm sorry Madam Pomfrey, I tried to follow your advice, but drawing images from... before... it wasn't helping me, it only made me feel worse. I found drawing images from now worked much better for me."

Serena smiled as she looked over Poppy's shoulder. Lots of drawings of Ginny, some of Ron and Hermione, the Burrow, school, Molly and Arthur, the twins and a large troll with a branding iron. Remus and Tonks. Even a picture of her and Severus and another of Poppy.

Poppy handed him the book saying, "That's alright Mr. Potter. The creative outlet helps you deal with your issues, even if you're not drawing them."

They sat and talked for a while longer before Dumbledore, Poppy and Serena left.

With her guests gone, Molly bustled around the kitchen, setting the dishes to washing and making a list of things needed from the garden. Once done, she called for Ginny a few times. When she didn't get a reply, she went in search for her daughter.

She didn't have to go far. Ginny sat in the living room, shooting her mum an apologetic look. Harry was stretched out on the couch asleep, his head in her lap. Molly smiled at Ginny, nodded and returned to the kitchen.

A bird in hand...

As the week progressed, things became tenser at the Burrow. Harry had suffered through several addition attacks that were both draining and depressing. After the last attack, Dumbledore made a careful survey around the Burrow and came to a decision. He had thought that Voldemort was just continually trying to attack him, but now he was certain there was a specific trigger for them.

Harry's health was being affected by the assaults. He had started to drop weight, and Molly was having trouble getting him to eat. Ginny was becoming frantic. Filius was working on a modification of the bubblehead charm and expected to have something for Harry in a week or so. But with each attack draining him so much, everyone was worried about what such a delay would do to the young man's spirit.

Less than a week before Harry's birthday, Dumbledore decided to do something about it. He'd had an idea a few days ago, but he needed help. So, he enlisted the assistance of Remus and Tonks and arrived at the Burrow very early one morning. Molly nearly shrieked when they all stepped out of the floo.

Motioning for her to be silent, Dumbledore explained in hushed tones that they were going to try something. The three crept silently outside and positioned themselves at a corner of the house, where they could watch Harry's window.

It wasn't long before Harry appeared near the window, a towel in hand. Dumbledore stepped around the corner with Remus and Tonks close behind. All three had their wands out.

Dumbledore raised his wand and intoned in a loud voice, "Aperio transtuli!"

There was a sudden shimmering near the window, and then a figure of a small man was falling to the ground.

"Stupefy!" Tonks yelled.

"Incarcerous!" growled Remus.

The falling man was hit by both spells as he struck the ground.

"Interesting," Dumbledore murmured as the three walked over to the bound, stunned man and turned him over. "Well that explains that. Patrick John O'Reilly. He's an animagus for an Irish criminal syndicate. Voldemort has used them in the past when his own people couldn't get the job done. Somehow, he was signaling to Voldemort whenever Harry went in to wash up."

Molly ran around the corner and skidded to a halt. She nearly screeched in fright when she spotted the man on the ground. There was a swish of an invisibility cloak hitting the ground as a Ministry Protective Service man appeared.

The man swore and asked, "Why didn't the wards warn us of this?"

"He obviously flew in, in his animagus form. The wards are designed to only detect the change within the their sphere of detection, not detect an animagus who's changed outside of the detection range before entering," Dumbledore replied.

Tonks snapped a pair of anti-apparition handcuffs on the still form, while the MPS man went to place a call for a pickup.

"Molly, I think Harry will be fine now. This man was telling Voldemort when to attack. Without him, Voldemort's back to the hit or miss approach."

Chapter 2 - Parties, Pensieves and Proposals

Party Plans...

With the capture of the animagus, the attacks on Harry had stopped. Harry's appetite returned, much to Molly's relief and he was finally recovering. It had been a bad week and Molly had been seriously worried for a while, Ginny as well.

With Harry feeling better, Molly kept an eye on her daughter. While she had all but given Ginny permission to have sex with her intended, she wasn't about to go out of her way to give her any opportunities! Molly and Arthur had discussed this extensively over the past few days. Both had been forced to admit they shared their daughter's fears for Harry's survival.

They also admitted that their daughter was a very determined young woman who would get what she wanted. Molly was surprised by Arthur's reaction when he learned that it had been Harry who had stymied their daughter on more than one occasion. Molly thought he'd be mad at Ginny, but instead he brushed that off and was actually pleased and proud of Harry! Molly was ready to strangle him when he said Ginny reminded him a lot of Molly when she was younger.

Arthur often surprised Molly. To the outside world, he often appeared as a henpecked husband. But he really wasn't as meek as he appeared. They had a true partnership in their marriage. He also offered her an insightful window into the male psyche that she lacked.

Arthur agreed that, sooner or later, Ginny would wear down Harry's resolve, but not until the young man was ready. In the meantime, he went on to explain that Harry was busy cementing their relationship in ways Ginny wasn't even aware of. Harry had increased his amount of publicly visible affection for Ginny, and it wasn't uncommon for them to take an afternoon nap out on that hammock behind the house. He was also involving Ginny in other aspects of his life.

When an owl had arrived from Remus two days earlier concerning a question about his portfolio, Harry took several hours to explain the issue to Ginny and then asked her opinion on it. Arthur explained that Ginny would eventually, through Harry, have a share of his fortune, and he was slowly showing her it meant more than just shopping sprees. Arthur made Molly feel a lot better. The both knew that Ginny had a good sense of responsibility. Harry, in trying to include her in some of the decisions he had to make, was reinforcing it. He probably didn't even know he was doing it. He merely wanted her to know that he valued her opinion.

Now it was just three days before Harry would come of age and gain full, unrestricted access to that fortune, and Molly was finding that, in one area, Harry was most unlike her children. Every one of her children, from Ginny to Charlie, would be dropping hints about birthday gifts and whom they wanted to invite to the party. But Harry never said a word about it. To Molly, it was one of the most frustrating things in the world! How could she plan for an event when the person they would be honoring seemed indifferent to it? This was a coming of age party! One of the most important events in a young wizard/witch's life! Finally, in desperation, she went to Ginny.

Molly found her in her room, reading a potions book Professor Snape had suggested during the school term.

"Ginny dear, can I have a word with you?"

"Sure Mum. What do you need?"

"Ginny, about Harry. Do you have any idea why he's not mentioned any sort of celebration of his birthday? He's not said a word to me about it, and it's only three days away."

Ginny thought about how best to explain what was happening. After a moment, she shrugged. There was no help for it, and no way to dance around the issue.

"He hasn't mentioned a party or presents because he doesn't expect any Mum. With the exception of a few people, like Ron and Hermione, he never gets birthday presents. His 'family' certainly never gave him any. He's always surprised when he does get a gift. In fact, he doesn't remember his one and only birthday party, and his parents were killed shortly afterwards. He's never had a party or a celebration since. The Dursley's never celebrated his birthday. Those bloody bastards sent him a single tissue for Christmas of his fourth year. A tissue!" She exclaimed hotly.

Molly was so busy digesting this new information that, for once, she ignored her daughter cursing. She wasn't happy to hear what Ginny said, but it explained a lot. Well, there was no help for it. This situation needed to be fixed!

Turning to her daughter, she smiled and said, "Well then Ginny, why don't we give your man a birthday party he'll never forget?"

"It will be a help when Hermione arrives tomorrow Mum. But you'll need to speak to Ron about it before he drags her off to some corner for hours at a time. As it stands, she may be in a state of shock anyway when she discovers Ron and Harry have both finished their schoolwork."

"I'll speak to Ron now, dear. You need to make up a list of people to invite. Let's keep it fairly small, some friends, family, perhaps Professor Dumbledore. Then I'll need to figure out a way of keeping Harry out of the Burrow the day of the party."

"That's easy, Mum. Invite Neville Longbottom and tell Harry he's coming over. He and Harry nearly share birthdays. I know Harry. He'll make arrangements to go to Diagon Alley to get him a gift."

The two shared a smug, conspiratorial look and continued planning.

A Hermione Homecoming...

The next afternoon, the Granger's car pulled up outside the Burrow. Hermione had barely stepped out of the car when she was grabbed and lifted high into the air by a red headed blur. Her eyes were saucers as Ron gently lowered her to the ground and hugged her tight to him.

Molly, Harry and Ginny stood in front of the house, letting the couple have a private moment. Dan and Emma Granger walked up to Molly. They had plans to stay a few days in a nearby inn, so they could spend more time with their daughter, her boyfriend and his family.

"Mione! I've missed you so much! Letters just couldn't tell you how much I've missed you."

Hermione laughed. "I've missed you too, Ron. I thought holiday with my parents would be great, but it wasn't much fun without you there."

Ron looked around and then he whispered, "Mione, Mum and Ginny need your help. In two days we're going to have a surprise birthday party for Harry! Mum was hacked that Harry never said anything about his birthday, until Ginny set her straight. Ginny's got a plan to keep him out of the house until it's time for the party, but they've both been hoping you can help them with it."

Hermione's eyes lit up in excitement. "Of course I'll help. Let me get my trunk and Crookshanks, and we'll go inside. How is Harry by the way? You wrote about those bad attacks..."

"He's fine now. Professor Dumbledore figured out what the problem was. Turns out Harry had an animagus spying on him. Dumbledore, Remus and Tonks caught the animagus and turned him over to the Ministry. Since then, there haven't been any more attacks. But wait 'til you see his eyes now! Took me a while to get used to them. He and Dumbledore had a staring contest. It was the funniest thing. I think they would still be staring each other down if Ginny hadn't interrupted them."

Ron grabbed Hermione's trunk, while Hermione cradled Crookshanks in her arms. She was really curious to see what Ron was talking about. Once inside, she released Crookshanks, who, being a cat, immediately claimed the most comfortable chair in the living room as his own. Ron took her trunk up to Ginny's room while Hermione went into the kitchen.

"Hermione! How are you dear? My, what a wonderful tan you have!" Molly said, grabbing Hermione in one of her patented hugs.

Once Molly released her, Ginny gave her a hug, and finally she went over to Harry, but was stopped by his amused gaze. Harry had been expecting this. So far, everyone had displayed the same reaction to his eyes. But since this was Hermione, he took the extra steps to her and hugged her.

"Nice to see you sis," he breathed into her ear.

She pulled back to look at him closely, before turning to Ginny. "Oh my... Ginny you're going to need a very big stick next term. Although I suppose you could just keep him on a real short leash. That would work."

Harry scowled at her. "Do you mind? I'm not some slab of meat that Ginny has to protect from a pack of starving dogs, you know."

"I'm just protecting my future sister-in-laws interests, Harry. Where is the harm in that?" she asked with a grin.

Harry sat back down muttering.

"What was that Harry?" Hermione asked sweetly.

"Nothing. I'm just wondering where I can pick up a pair of sunglasses to wear next year."

At his glum sounding reply, Ginny went over and sat on his lap. His arms wrapped around her automatically.

"Weren't you supposed to help Ron, Harry?" asked Molly.

"Oh right. Sorry Gin, you can have the chair. Ron's been having a problem charming the paintbrushes to paint your dad's workshop. I promised I'd help him."

Ginny stood so he could get up and he gave her quick hug before heading out the door. Once he was out of earshot, Ginny and Molly filled Hermione in on the plan. Even Emma got involved offering suggestions.

A Trip to Gringots ...

Two days later, when Harry came down to breakfast, Molly mentioned that Neville would be over around 3pm. Harry immediately asked if he could go see if Remus would take him to Diagon Alley. Molly and Ginny exchanged a smug look. Ginny asked if she could tag along and Harry said it was fine by him if Molly agreed.

Molly was a little upset. Harry hadn't mentioned to anyone that it was his birthday, and didn't seem overly upset when no one offered him any birthday wishes. She cursed the Dursleys for doing that to him. It might not bother Harry, but it bothered her a great deal.

Ginny and Harry apparated to Grimmauld Place around noon. Everyone thought Harry had plans of buying something, but Harry had an entirely different idea. He had spotted something in his vault inventory that he wanted. It was, in Harry's opinion, perfect for Neville.

Remus accompanied them as they apparated from Grimmauld Place to the Leaky Cauldron and from there into Diagon Alley.

Harry led Ginny and Remus straight to Gringots. Once inside, Harry stepped up to one of the goblins and asked to talk to Griphook. The goblin seemed to be surprised, but asked him to wait.

After a few minute wait a goblin came out to greet Harry with a big toothy grin. "Mr. Potter, what a pleasure it is to see you again. How can I be of service to you today?"

"Thank you, Griphook. It's good to see you as well. Might I ask that you escort my friends and I to my vault, please? Number 76."

"Certainly Mr. Potter, it would be my pleasure."

The goblin escorted Harry, Remus and Ginny to a cart. Remus was at a bit of loss as to why this particular vault. He knew of Harry's vaults, he'd even sent Harry a detailed inventory of them a couple months ago.

Harry looked at the two and saying, "It may take me a while to find what I'm looking for. Would either of you like to come in?"

Remus declined, but Ginny decided this time she was going to let curiosity win out. She followed Harry as he stepped up to the massive doors. The doors silently opened before them and Harry stepped inside with Ginny close behind.

Ginny stopped and gaped in shock. The room was bigger than a Hogwarts classroom and was about half full of galleons. Furniture and trunks took up the remaining room.

"Harry?"

"Hmmm?" he replied, rooting around in a trunk.

"Is this all of your money?" she asked timidly.

Harry looked around for a moment. "No most of this is overflow. This is supposed to be the heirloom vault. There are three others that have mostly money in them, plus a Black family heirloom vault."

"Harry you could have any girl in England...in the world, with this much money."

Harry frowned and stopped rooting around in the trunk so he could look at her. "Gin, I don't want just any girl, I want you. I'd give this all away in a flash before I'd let it come between us."

He walked over to her and gripped her gently by the shoulders and looked at her intently. "Understand me Ginevra Weasley, all of this is nothing, it's worthless compared to what you've given me. If this bothers you, tell me and I'll start giving it away to charities, to the poor, to anyone, until it's gone. This doesn't make me rich," he said waving his hand at the money. "Having you in my life does," he finished, softly.

She pulled him close and held him tightly to her. Finally she looked in his eyes. "The money isn't a problem, Harry. I knew it was there, it just wasn't real to me until I saw it."

He caressed her cheek softly. "It's going to be yours too someday. It may make our lives easier, but it's only money. Now, help me find what I need. I'm looking for a photo with my parents and Neville's parents, and a book."

They rooted around in the trunks for a while longer before Harry found the items he was looking for. Standing up, he looked at her and said softly, "Some day soon Gin, we'll come back here and pick out some nice jewelry for you to wear to our wedding. There's even some baby furniture in the back. But I have what I was looking for. Let's get going."

She linked her arm in his and they left the vault.

Happy Birthday, Harry...

Remus insisted on accompanying them back to the Burrow. While Harry thought that was strange, he didn't question it. However, when they apparated back to the Burrow and found it empty, his eyes narrowed. He was getting an itching feeling at the back of his neck. It felt like he was being watched, and it was making him very uneasy.

Before either Remus or Ginny could say anything, he hissed, "Stay here."

With a flick, his wand was out and his other hand was aglow. He cast a camouflage charm on himself and faded from view. The back door opened and closed.

Ginny ran outside after him yelling, "Harry! It's ok Harry! Don't do anything!"

Suddenly Ginny collided with an unseen object, bounced hard and fell on her butt. Harry appeared as his camouflage charm was dispelled. He looked sheepish as he re-holstered his wand.

The Weasley clan, minus Charlie, The Grangers, Tonks, Neville, Professor Dumbledore and Jack Parsons all eyed the young man warily. While he'd put his wand away, he still radiated enough magical energy to give many of them goose bumps!

After Remus helped Ginny to her feet, he placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Harry? Are you all right?"

"What's going on, Remus?" Harry asked.

"Listen to him!" shouted George.

"I know, he's totally hopeless," replied Fred.

"He has absolutely no clue..." George continued.

"...that this is HIS birthday party," finished Fred.

Harry stared at them. "My birthday party?"

"Are we sure..." Fred began.

"...he wasn't dropped on his head..." George continued.

"...as an infant?" Fred asked.

Ginny and Hermione both grabbed one of Harry's arms and, between them, dragged him forward to the table.

"Only you would use a camouflage charm and make it work even while you're moving Harry!" quipped Tonks.

Molly engulfed Harry in a huge hug. "Happy Birthday Harry dear!" She pushed him towards a chair and made him sit.

When Dumbledore stood and raised his glass, everyone fell silent. "There are a few special times in the life of a witch or wizard that are milestones. The birthday before going off to Hogwarts or one of the other magic schools is one such milestone. Another is what we are here today to celebrate. Harry's coming of age.

"Harry, by law and custom, you are now an adult wizard, entitled to all the rights and prerogatives of such. I'd ask all here to join me in wishing Harry a Happy Birthday!"

Everyone joined in singing the traditional birthday song and, for once, they were surprisingly on key. At the end of the song, George set off some of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes premiere fireworks.

When Fred handed him a glass, Harry looked at him suspiciously. But when Ron, who was a few months older than Harry, held up a similar glass, he relaxed a bit. He sniffed the liquid in the glass carefully then, throwing caution to the wind, took a mouthful.

Harry's eyes started burning and steam blew from his ears. For a brief moment, his normally unruly hair went completely straight in shock. Choking he gasped, "What is this stuff? It tastes like something I drank when I was five!"

Fred pounded on his back for a bit and ignored the glares from the women in the crowd. "That, Harry old chap, was Mongos Super Charged Firewhiskey, a real man's drink! It'll put hair on your chest!"

Harry smiled weakly at Fred and replied hoarsely, "I think your sister likes the fact that I don't have any hair on my chest."

With a slightly trembling hand, he placed the glass down on the table and conjured a butterbeer to drink instead. Harry didn't know it, but he had just earned himself major brownie points from all the women at the table. Even Dumbledore nodded approvingly. Dumbledore knew with the level of magic Harry was capable of. Remaining sober was important.

They all sat around a long table in the sun for an hour or so, before the younger folks decided to head for the swimming hole. After a quick stop in the house to change, they were soon diving in and splashing each other, laughing and squealing.

Harry watched wistfully from the water's edge. Until they found a way to keep his scar dry, he wouldn't be able to swim. So engrossed in watching his girlfriend splash around in her one-piece bathing suit, Harry never noticed the twins sneak up behind him until it was too late.

The airborne Harry had just enough time to close his mouth before impact.

Somewhere in England, Location unknown...

Voldemort was in a foul mood. He had already dealt with Murphy a few days earlier, sending his head back to the cartel in a box. While that had made him feel a bit better, today was shaping up badly. With his bridge to the cartel burned, he had to find another way of spying on the brat. Unfortunately, no new ideas had come to him, making his temper more vicious than normal.

Voldemort had spent most of the day meditating on his link to Harry. He knew this was a special day and he wanted to give Mr. Potter a special gift on his coming of age.

There! The link sharpened into clarity. Like a viper he struck with all his power.

Back at the party...

Harry hit the water with a loud splash and most everyone laughed.

Ginny was the only one not laughing. She shrieked when she saw the twins throw Harry into the pond, but it was too late to stop them. She did, however, manage to alert the adults that something was wrong.

Harry, his limbs rigid and pain exploding through his skull, sunk like a stone. He tried to breath, but his lungs filled with fluid and spots danced before his eyes. He felt himself hit bottom before darkness engulfed him.

Ginny darted out of the swimming hole and ran for the house. Ron, who had climbed onto the small floating platform they had in the center of the swimming hole, spotted Harry and dove for him. The twins, not understanding what the fuss was about, stood at the edge of the swimming hole looking bewildered, while Molly and the other adults arrived.

Ron dragged Harry's stiff form from the water and laid him on the grass. Ginny came dashing back from the house carrying a towel and the pot of his salve. She wiped his forehead dry and applied the salve, causing his muscles to spasm several times before finally relaxing.

Ginny leaned back on her legs in relief. Looking him over quickly to make sure there were no injuries, she noticed he wasn't breathing. She panicked, and started shrieking at the adults to do something.

It was Dan Granger who stepped up and flipped him over on his belly. Straddling the young man, he pushed down on Harry's rib cage, helping to expel the water from his lungs. Repeating the process several times, he finally stopped when he heard the boy cough, sputter and cough harder.

Seeing that Harry was breathing again, Molly turned on the twins. "WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?" she screamed at them.

"Molly," came a weak voice behind her. Harry was sitting up, leaning against Ginny.

"Yes, dear?"

"Don't blame them. They didn't know about the salve. I should have stayed at the table while the rest of them went swimming."

Ginny helped him stand up. He swayed slightly and steadied himself against her. Molly still looked ready to kill both her sons, but Harry was right. They didn't know about the salve. It wasn't that it was a big secret; they just never bothered to tell anyone about it who didn't need to know.

Ginny helped Harry to the table, sitting him down in a lounge chair big enough for the two of them. He pulled her into his lap and breathed deeply. His lungs hurt a bit, but everything seemed to be working.

"You know," Harry said quietly, breathing gently in her ear. "That suit is driving me nuts, love. If your brothers knew what I was thinking now, I'd be dead!"

She smiled inwardly at that. The suit, then, had its intended effect. Wiggling off his lap, eliciting a groan from him in the process, she curled up next to him. Once she was settled, Harry summoned the gift he had gotten for Neville and waved him over.

"Neville, I found these from my vault and I thought you might like to have them. The first is a photo of our parents together. It was taken shortly after they graduated from the Auror Academy. The second is my father's Auror's handbook. I know it's old and out of date, but it should be nearly identical to the one your Dad used."

Neville's eyes grew wide as Harry handed him the precious heirlooms. "Harry... I..."

"It's all right, Neville, really..."

Neville smiled at Harry and Ginny. They talked for a bit before Remus stood up and waved for everyone's attention.

Remus conjured a table and placed a large object on it. "Folks, listen up. This is what they call a Presentation Pensieve. It's capable of displaying life size images. Now, while Pensieves normally have a serious use, it's not uncommon to use one at parties like this to share joyous or funny memories. As you all know, Harry doesn't have a lot of memories of his parents, so I'd like to start the ball rolling by adding a few memories to the Pensieve. Once they're done, if you'd like to add one of your own, just come up here and I'll help you extract it.

"The first memory is one that will always remain special to me, even though I was, at best, a mere observer."

An image shimmered above the pensieve and grew to enormous proportions. Harry gasped.

James Potter stood in his finest robe in front of a younger Dumbledore. Beside him stood Sirius. He was nearly identical to Harry, except for the eyes, and he had sharper features. On Harry, his features had softened somewhat. The scene swung around to an open door as Lily Evans stepped into the room.

She was beautiful.

Harry sniffled a little and wiped at his eyes angrily. Ginny reached out and grabbed his hand.

Lily was dressed in a wonderful white robe that fit her like a glove. Her auburn hair spilled down her back in a gentle cascade of ringlets. Her eyes were alight with a fire of their own and they were fixed solely on James.

James stared back at Lily, his heart in his eyes. He watched her every movement as she approached the table with the marriage cup.

Harry watched mesmerized by the image before him. Ginny was torn. She wanted to watch the Pensieve's images, but she also wanted to watch Harry's reaction to them.

After they exchanged their vows, the scene shifted to them dancing. They never made it through their first dance as a married couple. As if by mutual agreement, and much to the amusement of everyone present, they slowed their dancing until they had reached a complete standstill. James whispered something to Lily, and then bent over to kiss her. Slowly, their kiss deepened. They were oblivious of everyone else watching them! It was just the two of them in that place at that time.

Even Ginny shed a tear watching that. It reminded her of their first formal dance. When the scene collapsed back into the Pensieve, Harry shook himself slightly, and then looked up at Remus with a sad smile on his face.

Arthur Weasley shouted out, "Well that explains why he chose Ginny. She could have been Lily's sister!"

Everyone laughed.

Remus stood and moved to the Pensieve again. "Now Harry, that was the start of something big, but no one knew just how big it was. As a baby, you kept dropping clues that you had no intention of being an ordinary wizard. James was pleased as punch over it, but to be truthful, you sometimes drove your Mum and him to distraction. You were a happy baby Harry, but as this next memory shows, you were a handful."

The scene above the pensieve rapidly expanded again.

It was a typical living room and sitting on the floor was baby Harry. He wobbled a bit, a little unsteady as he gazed, almost cross-eyed, at Snuffles, his Godfather's animagus form.

Baby Harry reached out to touch Snuffles on the nose, and then he shouted, "WOOF!" at the dog.

Snuffles looked at the baby for a moment then he barked once at Harry, which caused him to roll on his back in a fit of giggles that only a baby can have.

Everyone laughed at this. Ginny was smiling broadly. The twins were rolling on the ground with laughter.

Even as a baby, he had that unruly black hair and his gorgeous green eyes, Ginny thought.

George shouted "OY! The-Boy-Who-Lived is also The-Boy-Who-Barked!"

Baby Harry struggled back to a sitting position and shouted "WOOF!" at Snuffles again, which started the whole process all over. Finally, Snuffles turned away. Harry latched firmly onto his tail and was dragged, giggling, for several feet.

Suddenly, Lily appeared from a doorway and picked up Harry. "Honestly Sirius! I don't know who is worse, you or James! You dragging him and James giving him rides on prongs. Really!"

Lily cuddled Harry and blew against his belly, which caused him to shriek with laughter. She then placed him in a playpen, hoping he might nap and Snuffles curled up next it, keeping watch.

Harry spotted Snuffles and said softly, "Doggy!"

Snuffles looked startled as he was levitated into the playpen so Harry could have a soft pillow. Harry cuddled up with Snuffles and started to fall asleep when Lily came back into the room.

All the onlookers gasped at that. Most wizard children exhibited bouts of wild magic, but this was clearly intentional and wandless.

"SIRIUS!" she exclaimed, her hands on her hips.

Snuffles carefully stood up and leapt over the high railing. Before he could land, he was being levitated back into the playpen again. Snuffles gave the equivalent of dog shrug and curled up with Harry, who murmured "doggy" as he cuddled with the animagus.

Lily stood there for a long while, staring at the two of them. She couldn't help smiling at the pair. Harry slept, his head resting on the big dog. Snuffles eyed Lily warily and tried to pretend he was asleep.

James entered the room and approached her. "Lils? Something wrong? And why is Sirius in the playpen with Harry?"

"Harry levitated him into the playpen James. Although I sometimes think Sirius needs to be in a playpen all by himself anyway. But Harry! Merlin! James he's already doing wandless magic!"

"Lils, I've been telling you for months he's been doing magic. You just had to see it for yourself."

The scene faded at that point. Harry had a dreamy smile on his face, even Ginny was giggling at his antics.

"OY! Harry in his nappy! That's something we could have lived without!" shouted Fred.

"Ginny I should warn you right now. Harry's probably the most powerful wizard of this age and you're one of the strongest witches I know. Your kids could be far worse than he was," Remus shouted over the laughter.

Fred stepped up to the Pensieve and Remus helped him extract a memory of the time they turned the entire Slytherin Dungeon a shocking yellow.

Arthur shared the first time he had met Molly Prewett. Molly reached out and took her husband's hand during that memory.

Even Ron shared a memory of Harry's first game as a Gryffindor Seeker, with that outstanding high-speed catch he'd made while standing on his broom.

Hermione showed them all Ron and Harry taking on the Mountain Troll in their first year. The twins, of course, then teased the two younger men about the dangers of hanging out in the girl's bathroom.

There were several calls for Harry to share a memory with the group. Harry started to look worried. Ginny tried to reassure him, but he said to her in a low tone. "Gin, you don't understand. My best memories are of us, things we don't want to share, and the rest... aren't fun memories."

Dumbledore, sensing Harry's dilemma, stood up. "Harry, normally, at parties where a Pensieve is used, people do share happy or funny memories. I can see, however, that you truly have few of those to share. Something which I deeply regret. In such a case, people sometimes share a memory, which, while not happy, shows how a life-altering event took place. You have a memory of such an event. It's something which affected the entire Weasley family, and you were the only person conscious for most that event. If

you're willing, and Ginevra is willing, why not share what really happened in the Chamber of Secrets that night?"

The twins, Bill, Ron and even Hermione looked excited at this prospect. Even Arthur seemed intrigued. Molly looked like she wanted to see it, but was afraid to. The Grangers and Jack had no idea what they were talking about, but seemed interested.

"Ginny?" Harry asked softly. When Dumbledore had mentioned the Chamber, she'd closed her eyes tightly and went rigid. "Are you alright with this? Say the word and I won't show it."

She opened her eyes to look at him. "I think I need to see you kill him Harry. My family as well."

Harry nodded and went over to Remus to extract the memory. Remus waited until Harry had returned to his seat and wrapped both arms about Ginny before he began the playback.

The scene expanded rapidly into view.

It was dark in the chamber. A long row of snake statues lined the center of the room as a 12yr old Harry stepped in. He made his way up to the center, towards the huge snake carved in the far wall. Spotting Ginny, he ran to her. In his fright at her condition he mistakenly dropped his wand.

"Ginny! Ginny! Please wake up!" he pleaded with her, nearly in tears.

Then a hand appeared and picked up Harry's wand.

Harry stood to face Tom Riddle, Voldemort, who was slowly transferring Ginny's life force to himself.

Riddle bragged about what he had done and how he was the greatest and most powerful sorcerer in the world. He spoke about how soon Ginny would be dead and that he'd be fully alive once more.

"Sorry to disappoint you and all that, but the greatest wizard in the world is Albus Dumbledore. Everyone says so..."

"Dumbledore's been driven out of this castle by the mere memory of me!"

He paused as an unearthly music filled the chamber and as it did, Harry seemed to stand taller, straighter. Suddenly, atop one of the stone statues, appeared Fawkes. The phoenix swooped low over Harry and dropped a ragged bundle. The Sorting Hat.

"This is what Dumbledore sends his defender! A songbird and an old hat! Do you feel brave, Harry Potter? Do you feel safe now?"

There was a great slithering noise behind Riddle as the basilisk exited its lair. Harry closed his eyes, spun around, and ran.

There was a shocked gasp as people realized the size of the monster.

"KILL HIM," Riddle hissed to the basilisk.

The basilisk gave chase. Fawkes screamed and dived for its eyes. In a moment, the great snake was blind in both eyes and the basilisk's gaze was no longer a danger to Harry.

"NO! LEAVE THE BIRD! LEAVE THE BIRD! THE BOY IS BEHIND YOU! YOU CAN STILL SMELL HIM! KILL HIM!"

"Help me, help me," Harry murmured, "someone...anyone..."

When the blind serpent's tail swished by, it swept the sorting hat into Harry's lap. In desperation he grabbed it, and jammed it on his head.

Harry flinched, reached up and pulled the hat from his head. Reaching into it, he pulled out a gleaming silver sword. Gaining his feet, Harry turned, ready to face the basilisk.

Everyone gasped again. Ginny clung to Harry, her body trembling slightly. He tightened his grip around her.

"It's only a memory Gin," he said softly to her.

"I know, it's just that..." She closed her eyes.

When the crowd murmured, Ginny looked up, spellbound, as Harry fought the basilisk.

He swung the sword inexpertly, but well enough to make the beast wary of him. Slowly the beast backed him up against the wall. The snake reared up to strike. Harry lunged as the snake struck. The blade sunk deep into the roof of the mouth of snake, piercing the brain, one of the snakes venomous fangs broke off, lodged deep into Harry's arm. The snake reared back, ripping the blade from his hand and fell over thrashing in its death throes.

When the dying serpent's fang was driven into Harry's arm, Ginny flinched violently.

Hermione was holding Ron. Both looked shocked at what they were seeing. Molly was sobbing in Arthur's arms, but she continued to watch as well.

Poisoned and in great pain, Harry looked up at Riddle. He wrenched the fang from his arm and dropped it.

"You're dead, Harry Potter..."

When Ginny let out a quiet sob, Harry made her look him in the eye. "It's all right, love. Fawkes healed me. Remember? It's over, Ginny," he murmured, calming her.

Then, in a rush of wings, Fawkes had soared back overhead and something fell into Harry's lap. The Diary!

Harry seized the basilisk fang from the floor and brought it stabbing down into the book. The book fountained ink, he stabbed it again twisting the fang in the book and Riddle screamed in pain.

Ginny leaned away from Harry at this point, her chest heaving. "DIE YOU BLOODY BASTARD!" she screamed at the image.

Harry grabbed her, holding her close. She strained against him for a moment before relaxing.

Great bursts of light appeared to spear through him. He screamed again and then suddenly he was gone and Harry's wand dropped to the floor.

With a moan, Ginny sat up. Seeing her, Harry rushed to her side.

A few moments later, the scene faded out and everyone was silent. Ginny, her eye's wet with tears, looked up at Harry with some kind of wonder.

"I never knew. I heard the story before, but I never knew it was like that," she whispered.

"That was long time ago Gin and we won that one," he told her gently.

They stood up from the chair they had shared. Harry looked at the crowd of people worriedly. Everyone was looking at them silently.

It took the twins to break the silence.

"OY! If he can do that at twelve!" shouted Fred.

"Quite! At seventeen he's going to turn Voldemort into dust!" answered George.

Suddenly Harry and Ginny were surrounded by everyone. Dumbledore waved for silence and people quieted down.

"Harry, I know you told me what happened down there, but I don't think you managed to convey the depth of danger or pain you were in. I don't think anyone here realized exactly how bad it was, myself included. I am deeply impressed Harry, and deeply grateful. Had it not been for your actions, Voldemort would have returned two years earlier than he did."

Hermione broke in, "But Professor! The sword?"

"Yes Hermione, he truly did summon the sword of Godric Gryffindor. Where it has been these past 1000 years, no one knows. It now lies in a case in my office and, as far as I know, Harry is the only one capable of wielding it. The sword will not allow any hand to wield it. Only the heir of Gryffindor, either in blood or in like spirit, may do so safely. I can touch it briefly to move it, but cannot use it."

Arthur stepped over to Harry. Ginny held onto him like she never intended to let him go. "Harry..." Arthur began, his voice husky with emotion, "you saved our little girl for us, and then you gave her your heart. I can think of no better person for her than you. I'm proud of you son, and very grateful for what you did."

He grabbed them both in a hug. When he released them, Arthur looked into Harry's eyes, nodded and returned to Molly, who was still weeping softly.

Harry looked down at Ginny. "Are you going to be all right Gin? This isn't going to dredge up any nightmares for you, is it?"

She smiled up at him. "You killed him. If I have a nightmare from that, I'll just sneak into your room so you can hold me."

Jack put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "You've got brass ones the size of bowling balls, Harry! I know veterans that would've had the Hershey squirts seeing that snake!"

Everyone except Harry looked at Jack curiously.

Harry replied, "I just did what had to be done, Jack."

"I hear ya kid, but I still say you've got brass ones. Good job there."

The party started to break up shortly after that. The Grangers left for their rooms at the inn, Neville returned home, and Bill, the twins and Jack left the Burrow.

Harry, worried that Ginny might still be upset, stayed particularly close to her for the remainder of the evening. Dumbledore, Remus and Tonks stuck around for while after everyone had moved indoors.

Dumbledore told Harry to plan on bringing himself and his friends to Hogwarts in the next day or two. He suggested they ask Remus to escort them, but Harry reminded him that they needn't apparate to Hogwarts, as he could flame travel them there as Wings.

The Fudge Family Mansion...

Cornelius Fudge was not a happy man. His few remaining contacts within the government were telling him that Director Shacklebolt was close to uncovering information he didn't want to see uncovered.

Fudge was frantically throwing things into trunks; bond issues, wads of muggle cash, and some clothes. With his loss of a job at the Ministry, some people, no, make that many people, wanted to talk to him.

Fudge was not a Death Eater, but he had been sympathetic to their cause. Lucius Malfoy had been his principle contact among them, and the single source of his greatest cash flow. Malfoy would couch things as suggestions, but Fudge knew they were really orders.

He was trying to close one of the trunks when the door to his bedroom blew off the hinges and flew into the room. Several Death Eaters rushed in, grabbed him by the arms and forced him to his knees.

A figure appeared in the doorway.

"Going somewhere, Cornelius?" Voldemort asked, softly.

"N-N-No my lord! I was just putting stuff into trunks for storage," Fudge stammered back.

"I am most disappointed in you Cornelius. First, you fail to keep my return secret. Then, you allow Dumbledore to remain in control of his school. And finally, you let Potter interfere with my plans again!"

"B-b-but my lord! I tried!"

Fudge could hear the screams now, coming from other rooms with the mansion. His family!

"There are consequences for trying and failing Cornelius. Let me show you," the Dark Lord said conversationally.

Back in the Burrow...

They were all still sitting around the table, talking. Dumbledore was starting to tell Hermione about the Headmaster's library when he paused.

Harry reached over to grab the small pot in front of Ginny. He took the pot and carefully applied more salve to his scar, his hands trembling slightly. After a moment, he applied a little more. Finally, he leaned back and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Harry? What is it?" the Headmaster asked.

"I'm not sure, Sir. Once the salve is on, it rarely bothers me. But tonight it was burning right through the salve. I think he's personally killing tonight. Slowly and taking a lot of joy from it."

"Remus, you and Tonks go alert the Order. I'll floo to the Ministry myself to see what's going on. I'm sorry we have to break up your birthday celebration like this Harry, but we must put things in motion to protect ourselves and you."

"I understand Sir, and thank you for coming today."

The Fudge Family Mansion...

The last Death Eater to leave the mansion spat on the door before he exited. Turning to face the building, he lifted his wand skyward and shouted, "MOSMORDE!"

Back at the Burrow...

It was late and Harry had trouble sleeping. His scar wasn't bothering him, but the reason behind it was. Tonight, somewhere beyond his window, Voldemort had killed. And here he was, lying in bed doing nothing about it.

Finally, he gave up trying to sleep and threw on some clothes. He crept from his room and headed downstairs. Leaving the house, he looked up at the night sky. It seemed so appealing to him right now, cloudless, the stars seemed so bright, so peaceful.

Without even thinking, he transformed into Wings and sprang aloft. He flew around the house a few times before he began to spiral upwards. As he started his upward climb, he began to sing a song of light and hope. The wards around the house started to shimmer in the night air, as the powerful phoenix magic lent them its strength.

Ginny and Hermione were awakened by the song and were standing by the window watching the wards when Molly came into the room.

"Ginny? Do you know what Harry's doing?"

"He's strengthening the wards, Mum. If I know Harry, the thought of people dying tonight kept him from sleeping, so he decided to do something useful. He feels grief for every death Mum, like he's personally responsible for them. Even for people he doesn't know. I remember him being upset about having to kill Pansy, but she left him no choice in the matter."

Harry continued to spiral upward, singing his song. After nearly an hour, he returned to the Burrow and resumed his normal shape. He climbed the stairs and headed into his bedroom. Ginny was standing by the window, still looking out at the shimmering wards.

"Ginny? I'm sorry, did I wake you?"

She went to him and led him over to his bed. Pushing him down, she followed and curled up next to him. He was still fully dressed, but she was in her nightshirt.

"But Gin? Your parents..."

"Hush Harry. You need your sleep and tonight I need to be held by you. Mum will understand, especially since you're fully dressed. Now sleep, love. You've done enough for tonight."

Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts...

It was a bemused Harry who brought Ron, Ginny and Hermione to the Headmaster's office one morning, three days after his birthday. Harry was confused because no one, not even Molly, had complained about Ginny sleeping in his bed. The fact that she had done it again the next night, and the night after, and still no one commented, was a shock to him. They had done nothing but sleep. Ginny said she needed to be held, and Harry was more than happy to oblige, but he really expected Molly or Arthur to pitch a fit.

Harry's control was sorely tested over those nights. He'd climbed into bed still wearing his pants and Ginny told him to get rid of them. Ginny wasn't making this any easier on him. Oh they'd kiss and snuggle, but Harry wouldn't let them go any further, to Ginny's disappointment.

Ginny, on the other hand, felt things were going according to her master plan. She was laying the groundwork so that she could occasionally slip into Harry's room at night, without the expected parental fight. She had been almost as shocked as her parents had been after witnessing what happened in the chamber. None of them knew it was that bad, and all of them realized that, had it not been for Fawkes deciding he was worthy of healing, she would have lived and he would have died that night.

It had affected her whole family in various degrees. It had only been a few days, but in that time, most of her family had come to realize that she was no longer the baby of the family. She had lived with Voldemort in her head for nearly a year, and had been saved by the man she wanted to marry. She was taking advantage of the new found respect from her family to make a few minor changes in the way things were done.

Spending the night with Harry was going to be one of those changes. She didn't intend to spend every night in his bed, just enough. She knew that in only a few days time, Harry was going to formally propose to her and she wanted her family to realize she was adult enough to handle at least some of the issues in her life.

And so it was a bemused Harry that flashed into the Headmaster's office, carrying his three friends.

Dumbledore looked up from his desk when the four of them appeared. Wings sang a song of greeting to Fawkes, who returned it. Then Harry transformed back into his normal self.

"Welcome. Please, have a seat. Would anyone care for a lemon drop?" the Headmaster asked jovially. When they all politely declined, Dumbledore turned directly to business.

"As I started to say the other day, the Headmaster's private library contains volumes which the Headmaster's have acquired over the years of their tenure. Ordinarily, those volumes go into the main library when the Headmaster dies. Occasionally however, they will find themselves with books too dangerous to be available to everyone. Those volumes end up in my private library, which you will be given access to."

Dumbledore rose to his feet and walked over to a bare wall. "Chocolate frogs," he said, eyes twinkling.

The wall shimmered and a corridor appeared. The group followed Dumbledore into a luxurious study, which opened into a large area, containing row upon row of bookshelves filled with books.

Hermione looked around in wonder. "Where do we even start?" she breathed.

"I've been thinking about that Hermione," Harry replied. "I think you three should concentrate on spells we can adapt for use in defending the castle. I'm going to be looking into bonds, charms and the hard sciences like crystals and alchemy."

They nodded in agreement and started moving among the books.

After many hours of looking, Hermione had a long scroll of spells that had possible uses and Harry had managed to find one book and had a very short scroll of notes he had taken. The four trudged back up the corridor to find Dumbledore still at his desk.

"Ah good! I was about to come and get you four. Dinner is about to be served in the Great Hall. You'll find it much different than during the school term. I've already sent a message to Molly, saying you'd be eating here before returning to the Burrow..."

Dumbledore was interrupted when the sorting hat suddenly spoke.

"Mr. Potter! Did I not tell you that you'd do well? I could see it then and I can see it even better now!"

Harry looked startled by the hat, then embarrassed. "Um... Thanks."

"Well Mr. Potter, are you ready?" asked the hat.

"Excuse me please, but ready for what?" asked Harry.

The hat suddenly broke into song, startling Dumbledore even more.

From Four to one,
It must be done.

The time to sort is near,
But that sort is unclear. Hogwarts students must unite,
Each must rally to the fight.

Never doubt the light,
While the mark guides it through the night.

All five of them stood there, stunned. Dumbledore quickly broke from his surprise and scribbled down what the hat had sung.

"Professor? What was that all about?" asked Hermione.

"I'm not entirely sure, Miss Granger. It is but one of several mysteries we seem to be collecting this holiday," Dumbledore said, standing and ushering them from the office. "But come, dinner awaits and many of the teachers are waiting to say hello to you all. We can discuss this then."

Entering the Great Hall, Harry could see what Dumbledore had meant. All of the house tables had been removed. In the center of the hall sat one large, comfortable table, around which sat most of their teachers and five empty chairs.

"Sorry we're late everyone, but the Sorting Hat and Harry decided to have a little last minute conversation."

That startled the teachers. Even those not directly involved in the research task Dumbledore had doled out had heard about the incident with the hat. And now it was talking to Harry?

Dumbledore would say no more about the hat in front of the students. He politely informed them that he'd explain everything in time, but for now, they would have to be patient. Besides, they had their own mysteries to deal with, without having to ponder others.

Harry agreed to that interpretation for now. He had enough to do as it was. He did, however, expect Dumbledore to eventually explain what was happening. He reminded Dumbledore that the only way they could work together was to do so openly. Dumbledore admitted he'd be happy to give Harry the information, but until he had something other than questions to share, there wasn't a point to it.

So they spent the rest of their time talking pleasantly with their teachers and among themselves. It was then that Hermione finally found out that Ron and Harry had completed all of their schoolwork.

Hermione rounded on Ron, furious. "What? You didn't tell me about this? Ronald, are you sure it's all correct? How do you know you did it right? You did all of it? Including all of the reading and the essays?"

Ron wore a pained expression. "But 'Mione..."

Harry put a hand on Hermione's shoulder. She turned and was about to lie into him for good measure but, before she could, he said, "Hermione, he didn't do it because he didn't need your help. He did it because he needed you. Doing his homework before you showed up reminded him of you, and it prompted him to work even harder so that you two would have more free time."

Having had the rug pulled from under her feet, Hermione suddenly realized she had vocalized her biggest fear in her relationship with Ron. She was afraid that he wouldn't need her after school.

Ron took her hand shyly. "I'll always need you 'Mione," he said simply, causing Hermione to blush.

The teachers had watched this little drama play out with great interest. Hermione was a favorite student for many of them. And Ron, well he was a nice boy, but not a real industrious student.

Minerva McGonagall broke the silence by adding, "I must say, Miss Granger, if you're able to so motivate Ronald Weasley into completing his homework assignments early, then perhaps I should turn you loose on several other students I know." She glanced in Harry's direction.

Harry grinned back at her. "But Professor, my homework is finished too. Besides, the other summers don't count. I wasn't allowed..." He trailed off suddenly and gripped the table edge. He had been about to tell them all that, during the previous summers, he had been locked in his room and his belongings locked in the cupboard.

Everyone knew this. All of his friends, all of his teachers, but he hadn't really spoken much about what happened between him and the Dursleys to anyone except Ginny.

"I wasn't allowed to do my schoolwork, Professor," he said softly.

Serena rescued both Harry and Minerva at that point. "We know Harry, and we're glad that problem no longer exists for you."

He nodded gratefully to her.

Dumbledore then picked up the conversation. "Harry, Professor Flitwick is on holiday, but he sent an owl this morning with a modification to the bubblehead charm that will allow you to wash or get your head wet without washing off the salve."

He passed a scroll across the table to Harry. He quickly scanned the charm and, without a wand, cast it a few times on his water glass. He then turned the glass on its side and watched the water pool behind the invisible barrier, never leaving the glass.

He grinned and said, "Now I'll be able to go swimming. Maybe even learn how now." He looked up from the glass and found them all gaping at him.

Finally Ron stammered out, "B-B-but Harry! What about the second Tri-Wizard challenge in the lake? You don't know how to swim?"

Harry shrugged. "No one's ever taken me anywhere where I could swim, Ron. You guys only built your swimming hole last summer and I wasn't there then. As to the Tri-Wizard challenge, I used Gilly Weed."

Ron just shook his head, but he wasn't the only one to do so.

"Well Harry, I pray that someday, when this is all over, you'll take a long holiday and enjoy some of the things you've missed," Dumbledore said.

"I hope so too, Sir."

After finishing their dinner, the four stood to leave. Ron, Hermione and Ginny linked hands as Harry transformed into Wings and sprang aloft. He circled the hall a couple times, singing.

"Show off," Ron muttered.

Ginny and Hermione giggled as Wings swooped down to them. Ron grabbed a tail feather and in a flash of flame all of them were gone.

Dumbledore turned to the other teachers and passed around the copy of the Sorting Hat's latest contribution.

After everyone had read it Dumbledore said, "I am beginning to see what the hat may be trying to say. If I'm correct, then I fear we have a problem on our hands."

Severus looked up sharply. "What do you mean, Albus?"

"For the past two years running, we have ignored the warning the hat has given us about uniting the houses. In fact, Harry has done more to unite them than any of us here, myself included. I fear the first stanza of this latest song suggests the hat may refuse to sort the incoming students this year."

"But Albus! How will we sort the students this year if that happens?" Minerva asked with a gasp.

"The students will be sorted Minerva, even if we resort to simply drawing lots."

"I must admit that this whole house business has always confused me, Albus. My school did well enough without segregating the students and setting them at odds against each other," Serena said with some confusion.

Dumbledore nodded. "Your Caribbean Institute of Magic is a fine school Serena, and you are right to be proud of them. But Hogwarts is the oldest school of Witchcraft and Wizardry in the world. As much as we may dislike them, there are certain customs which we cannot easily throw away."

"Don't misunderstand me Albus. I'm not suggesting we throw anything away. All I'm suggesting is that we work to reduce the differences between the Houses. Look at what Harry has accomplished. He has people from every house in his group, and he left Slytherins in charge of the castle during the fight at Hogsmeade. Harry trusted them with the safety of the school and the student body. I know they had orders to evacuate the students in case of attack. I just feel we would do well copying his example," Serena explained.

"I have to agree Albus. As much as I enjoy being the Head of my house, I was surprised and pleased that Harry would place such an important task in the hands of Slytherin. He showed a great deal of trust in giving them that task, and they rose to the challenge," Severus added.

Dumbledore turned a twinkled gaze at the two of them for a moment. "Severus, you have, in the service of this school, and the service of the light, done great things for us. But I can think of no greater thing you have done than bringing your wife to us. She has wisdom and wit, and was able to reach out to Harry when I could not. I think we are in your debt.

"But come now. There are other things we must discuss tonight; including the fact that soon we will be adding a new Professor to our ranks. One, I might add, who is not wizard nor witch..."

The Chang Family residence...

Cho paced her room angrily. She had made the necessary retraction to get Harry's charm deactivated, but she knew it was still there. The humiliation was complete. Most of her friends wouldn't talk to her. Several possible job opportunities had dried up! All because of Potter and his trollop!

Wan Chang watched her older sister warily. Cho had been on the rampage all summer. Wan was annoyed with her sister because her behavior was inappropriate. On the other hand, Harry Potter had shamed not only Cho, but the whole Chang family name as well. And shame was something every ethnic oriental understood.

Wan lay back on her bed and tried to block out Cho's raving. It was much more fun to think about that nice nineteen-year-old Danny Wong, who seemed so interested in her. The fifth year Hufflepuff tuned out her sister's ravings and daydreamed instead about a certain Mr. Wong...

The Burrow, two days before Ginny's Birthday...

Ginny had made her point with her parents. She spent three, sometimes four nights a week with Harry. Harry still wouldn't allow much to happen, but he did complain he was having trouble sleeping on the nights when she didn't visit him. Even with silencing charms, she didn't get much farther than some snogging and heavy petting. His complaints about sleeping made her sure his resolve was weakening.

Today, Ginny and Harry were sitting next to a tree not far from the swimming hole. Ginny had been giving Harry lessons and, once he got over his reaction to her in that swimsuit, he actually managed to pick up the basics fairly quickly. He wasn't very comfortable swimming yet, but he was getting there.

Ron and Hermione were still swimming.

They were taking a break from his lessons, but Ron and Hermione were still splashing around in the water, the sounds of their merriment floating on the slight breeze. Letting the laughter fade into the background, Harry checked Ginny's occulmency shields.

"They're pretty good Gin. I think you've mastered the art. Now, have you been using those meditation exercises I told you about? The ones to find your animagus form?"

"Yes. I am pretty sure I know my form, but my problem is getting it out of its cage. I just don't know how to do that."

"Try this. I want you to think of the most powerful spell you know. Close your eyes and allow the magic you need to cast the spell to build up within you, but don't release it."

She closed her eyes and her brows furrowed in concentration. A few moments later, she opened her eyes and looked at Harry.

"Do you feel it, Gin? The magic sitting there, straining to break out?"

She nodded. "I feel it. It's like this strange sensation in the pit of my belly."

"Good. Now, try to increase that feeling. Let the magic build up higher and higher. Concentrate on making the power surge within you. But again, don't release it. When you feel that it can't go any higher, try to push it back down. Push it all the way down to nothing again."

Ginny ran through these exercises several times until she could call the magic forth fairly quickly. "That's incredible Harry! Is that anything like what you feel?"

"No, but if you want, I'll let you feel what I feel another time. Right now, I'm trying to help you. However, before I go one step further, what is the very first thing you have to do if you succeed in your transformation?"

"I fight the instincts, examine the form, then I change back. Right?"

"Good! Now, the form is caged, just like my form was caged. What you need to do is build up the magic while concentrating on your caged form. To break through the cage, throw the magic you have built up at it. You may need to batter the cage a bunch of times before it breaks."

"Are you ready to try, Gin? You don't have to do this. I couldn't live with myself if you get trapped in the form."

Ginny looked in his eyes and saw the fear behind them, but she wanted to press on anyway.

"I won't mess up love. You went through this alone. I have you to help me."

Ginny...

She sat there for a moment, breathing deeply and centering herself like Harry taught her. Then she started building up the magic within her. She felt like she was going to explode, holding so much power. Bringing up the image of her form, she thought about what Harry had told her. Break the cage he said. But what if she opened a hole big enough for the form to escape? Wouldn't that serve the same purpose?

She channeled her magic into the cage at selected points. Within seconds one whole side of the cage dropped free and she felt herself transform.

To run, to climb, to hunt! I must hunt! She thought. Her preternaturally sharp hearing allowed her to zoom quickly in on prey. She twisted and tilted her ears and, zeroing in on the direction, stood and silently padded forward.

Harry...

Harry was surprised at how easy her transformation went. She hadn't had to work on breaking the cage for very long.

Hmm, she's some kind of wildcat. Spotted, red-orange in color. And check out her ears! She's got tufted ears! He thought.

He watched the cat's ears twisted and twitched. He was suddenly overcome with a feeling of dread. Something was wrong! In his mind, he could see her letting the beast assume control.

He didn't know what to do. In desperation, he sent a single thought to the animal before him.

GINNY! NO!

Ginny...

GINNY! NO!

The cry pierced her mind. It was a scream of unspeakable loss and shocked her to the core. Frantically, Ginny looked at her form and concentrated, fighting the instincts she felt. Slowly, she mastered them, allowing her human intelligence to gain control of the beast.

She looked over at Harry; saw his body tremble, and the grief, guilt-ridden expression on his face. In that moment, she knew what had happened. She had let the beast assume control in the beginning, and only his cry had allowed her human self to regain control. But he didn't know that. He thought he'd lost her. Transforming quickly, she knelt down beside him.

"Harry, I'm so sorry. If it weren't for your cry, I would have lost myself!"

He flung his arms around her and crushed her to him. There was no mistaking his relief as his shudders slowly decreased. She held him, running her hand up and down his bare back.

"It's ok now, you pulled me back."

He looked at her carefully, then he kissed her. He put every ounce of love and his relief into that kiss. When they finally broke apart, both were breathing hard.

"Harry, will I go through that every time I change?" she asked softly, a little afraid.

"No love, just the first time. You know what you are, don't you?"

"Umm... some kind of cat. But not like Professor McGonagall."

"You're some sort of spotted wildcat Ginny, like a miniature Cheetah. Which means, you have a perfect Marauder name. I dub thee, SPOTS!"

Ginny giggled. "Spots. I like the sound of that. Wait 'til Ron and Hermione find out!"

Harry got a wicked gleam in his eye. "Want to have a little fun?"

Ginny nodded.

"When I tap you on the shoulder, go ahead and change. For now though, just follow my lead, all right?"

The two walked over to the swimming hole. Ron and Hermione were laying out on the center platform, holding hands.

"OY! Ron, 'Mione! Come over here a moment, will you?"

Ron and Hermione looked at the two. Standing, they dove off the platform, swum to shore and climbed out.

"What's up mate?" Ron asked.

"I've got a question for your girlfriend and it's important. Hermione, have you ever read a book about cats?"

"Cats? Of course I have, several in fact. But what does that have to do..." She trailed off as Ginny transformed.

Harry pointed to his girlfriend. "Good! What is she?"

Ron's jaw dropped.

Hermione sputtered, "S-S-She t-t-transformed! Oh, she's cute too! But what is she?"

She frowned and walked around Ginny's cat form, examining her from all angles.

"Harry, I think she's a Serval. Servals are sometimes called the 'poor man's Cheetah' because the appearance is so similar. It's pretty rare, about the size of a North American Bobcat or Lynx. In terms of speed and stealth, it can be really nasty. Add the claws and teeth, and it's a very formidable form."

Spots walked over to Harry and started to rub herself against his leg, purring loudly. Harry reached down and scratched behind her ears. She pushed her head back against his hand.

Harry was about to reach down to pick her up when she changed back to her human form. Ginny grinned at everyone.

"Ok, Ginny has her animagus down pat. Next, I work with you 'Mione on wandless magic. I know you're still having problems getting beyond the need for a wand. But it will have to wait 'til after Ginny's Birthday."

Hermione nodded gratefully.

"Harry, are you really going to propose to my little sister on her birthday? In front of everyone?" Ron asked.

"Yes, I'm going to propose on her birthday. But no, it will be done privately, Ron. Would you want an audience when you propose to Hermione?"

When Ron frowned, Harry and Ginny turned and headed for the house. Neither saw the evil glint in his eyes as he watched them walk away.

That night, two letters were sent from the Burrow...

Moony!

It is with extreme pleasure that Wings is able to report the successful completion of Little Red's apprenticeship. Little Red is hereby known as Spots! Please add Spots to the official Marauder's role.

Wings

And the second letter was more ominous.

Weasley Brothers!

It has come to my attention that our little sister will become engaged on her birthday ONLY if her intended manages to find some privacy to pop the question. Now, this strikes me as not quite a prank, but still a really effective way to annoy both her and Harry to pieces if enough of us are present to prevent the possibility of any privacy. So, anyone up for a game of Annoy-the-Potential-Groom?

Ron

The next morning, Harry received a note of congratulations from Remus.

Ron received four replies.

Diagon Alley...

Wan Chang sat with her boyfriend, Danny Wong, at Florean Fortescue's ice cream parlor, enjoying the Double Chocolate Fudge Sundae he'd bought for her, while he talked about the shame that had been inflicted on her family. Shame inflicted by a half-blood! She nodded, agreeing with his statements. He was just so handsome and so smart!

Yes, even she could see the shame of what happened to her family. She understood when Danny explained it. It seemed so easy now.

Slowly, the seed of anger and resentment was building in her towards one Harry Potter. A filthy half-blood who supported mudbloods!

Happy Birthday Ginny...

Ginny's birthday dawned bright and sunny. Harry got up early and took his shower. Taking extra care, he dressed in his best casual clothes. He had a present for Ginny that Remus had picked up for him. And for the tenth time before he left the room, he made sure he had the ring on him. He wasn't sure when he'd get the chance to be alone with Ginny though. Probably in the morning sometime, since the party wasn't scheduled until late afternoon.

He left his bedroom and went downstairs. Heading into the kitchen, he was shocked to discover Fred, George, Bill, Percy and Ron grinning at him.

Warily, he placed Ginny's present with the rest of her gifts just as Molly turned from the stove.

"Harry dear, sit and have some breakfast. Isn't this wonderful? Most of my boys came over early to spend time with their sister on her special day!"

With a sinking feeling, he wondered if he was going to get any time alone with Ginny at all today. Professor Trelawney would have been extremely proud of her student's precognitive abilities, for he turned out to be one hundred percent correct!

After breakfast, Ginny and Harry decided to go do some flying on their brooms. Suddenly all of the Weasley boys wanted to fly with them. When they started talking about getting up a scratch Quidditch game, both Harry and Ginny backed out, thinking they might go swimming instead. But the scratch Quidditch game was cancelled in favor of a swim.

By lunch, Harry was getting more than a little annoyed. Ginny could see it. Hermione watched this strange game of Follow-the-Couple-Around with mounting horror. By the time the party started, Harry and Ginny had been followed to nearly every corner of the Burrow, sometimes by one brother, sometimes by two, sometimes by all.

For the last two hours Harry was nearly shimmering with pent up magic. It was a clear warning sign and all the Weasley brothers were ignoring it. If that wasn't enough, Ginny had been on the verge of tears several times, and the only thing that had saved her brothers was the fact that her tears hadn't fallen.

Halfway through the party, Harry pulled Hermione outside of earshot and whispered, "Hermione, did you know about this?"

"No, Harry. I'm nearly as angry at Ron as you are."

"I'm sorry for what Ginny and I are going to be doing to you two this coming year. If you're lucky, you might get some private time with him, but I wouldn't count on it," Harry said angrily.

Hermione looked aghast at him. Then she realized just how important this time was supposed to be for them, and Ron had ruined it.

Her voice turned steely. "That's all right, Harry. I not only see your point, but I'll help you!"

When the two returned to the party, Ron went to Hermione, put his arm around her shoulder, and grinned at Harry. He stopped grinning however, when Hermione shrugged his arm off and started to keep a minimum of three feet between them the rest of the night.

As Molly cleared off the table and prepared for Ginny to open her presents, Harry stood up. He cast multiple sticking charms, then turned to Molly.

"Molly, will you please excuse me? I'd like a while alone with Ginny. We'll be back in less than an hour."

Molly glanced quickly to Ginny's hand and nodded agreeably to Harry. "Of course, dear. We'll have tea and some cake when you get back."

Harry took Ginny's hand in his and walked out the back door and into the cool night air.

Inside the house, five Weasley brothers struggled to get out of their chairs. The charm wore off a minute later and they ran for the door. Molly started yelling after them, while Hermione sat at the table, her arms crossed and looking furious at the departing brothers.

The five of them rushed outside just in time to see a flash of flame in the night sky.

Harry brought Ginny to the Hogwarts Astronomy tower. She flung her arms around him as soon as he reverted to his human form and cried, "How could they be so mean, Harry?"

"It was Ronald, Gin. I've already spoken to Hermione about it and told her she'll be lucky to have two minutes alone with him this year. Oh, I can assure you the others aren't getting away with this. Those clowns are going to pay for it. But not now. Now I have more important things to do."

He led her over to a bench and sat her down. He took both of her hands in his own. "Ginevra Weasley... will you marry me?"

Ginny smoothed the hair from his forehead. "Yes Harry Potter, you know I will."

Harry pulled the ring case from his pocket and removed the engagement ring. Then, taking her hand, he removed the promise ring and slipped it into the engagement insert. There was a brief flash of light in his hand as the two rings merged into one, with a single large solitaire diamond. The diamond pulsated, just like the promise ring did. Taking the now joined rings, he slipped it onto her finger and kissed her.

Headmaster's office, Hogwarts...

A smiling Albus Dumbledore looked out his window, having spotted the flash of light atop the astronomy tower. He figured out what was happening. More than one proposal had been made atop that particular landmark. Pulling out his wand, he mumbled an incantation under his breath and released the spell aimed at the tower, bathing it in thousands of fairy lights.

Still smiling, Dumbledore closed his window and returned to his work.

Atop the Astronomy Tower...

When Harry and Ginny finally broke their kiss, both of them gasped at the thousands of sparkling fairy lights that surrounded the top of the tower.

"Harry, did you do that?"

Harry had a bemused smile on his face. "No Gin. I think we've just gotten a present from our Headmaster, that sly old goat. He must have spotted us arriving and figured out why we were here."

Harry turned to kiss his fiancée under the dancing lights.

Back to the Burrow...

Forty-five minutes later, they returned to the Burrow and entered the kitchen through the back door, holding hands. Arthur, Molly and Hermione looked from Ginny's face, to the ring on her finger and beamed. Harry hadn't gone crazy with the stone, but it was a modest three carats.

The boys, however, were anything but happy. While the couple was gone, Hermione had explained to Molly and Arthur, in scathing detail, what they had done to Ginny and Harry. Molly's reaction was bad enough, but even the ever-complacent Arthur had been appalled.

While Molly, Arthur and Hermione were busy talking to Ginny and exclaiming over the ring, Harry looked at the five brothers and said in a dangerously low voice, "You five! Living Room! Now!"

The five of them slipped out of the kitchen followed by Harry.

"Sit," Harry growled.

Everyone scrambled for a seat. Harry's eyes were shining brightly, and the magic shimmered in waves around him. The five Weasley's were suddenly reminded that this was the man who'd killed a sixty-foot long basilisk. With a sinking feeling, they all realized that this wasn't just Harry, this was their future brother in law, and they'd managed to piss him off.

"You hurt Ginny. I find that unacceptable. If we weren't family, I'd be seriously angry with you. As it is, I think a lesson needs to be taught."

Harry walked past each of them, touching them with one glowing hand. At his touch, they each transformed.

Bill turned into a bald Buddhist monk.

Fred became a sad faced clown, holding a large bicycle horn.

George transformed into a female clown with a huge bust.

Percy changed into a Shakespearian actor, complete with period costume, including a grossly oversized codpiece.

Fred looked at the other four, then at the unchanged Ron and said, "But HONK, what about HONK, him!"

George looked like he was going to bust out laughing, until sparks started shooting out of the ends of his breasts and a pair of union jack flags popped out of his ears. His nose started blinking wildly.

Harry eyed Ron for a moment. "His girlfriend will be administering that punishment. Take this as a warning. I'll not tolerate anyone hurting my fiancée."

Bill nodded sagely. "If you do not tend to one another, then who is there to tend to you?" Horrified, he clamped his hand over his mouth.

Percy looked at them all sadly. "Present fears are less than horrible imaginings." His eyes widened fearfully.

Harry walked back into the kitchen and everyone eyed him carefully. He smiled, then, shrugging his shoulders, he took a seat and pulled Ginny into his lap with a smile.

Molly looked worried. "Harry, where are the boys?"

"They're in the living room, contemplating what they've done. Call them in if you wish."

Molly raised an eyebrow, but yelled, "BOYS! Get in here!"

Ron came in and took a seat next to Hermione, who immediately got up and sat next to Harry.

Percy stepped in next, and everyone gasped at his costume. He turned, looked at his brothers still in the living room and said, "Screw your courage to the sticking-place, and we'll not fail." He shrugged and took a seat muttering, "The attempt and not the deed confounds us."

Arthur was starting to smile from his chair. Molly looked at her two sons and her eyes narrowed. "GEORGE! GET IN HERE NOW!"

The door opened and George shuffled into the room. Ginny and Hermione collapsed in a fit of giggles. George's breasts were making a decidedly sloshing sound as he walked. His dress was too short, but it tinkled prettily. He was about to speak when more sparks shot from his breasts. Dejected, he sat down next to Percy.

Ginny was having trouble breathing. She had jammed a fist in her mouth to prevent her howls of laughter from escaping.

Fred walked in next. He had a floor length tie that kept stiffening and snapping up to smack him in the head. "Harry, HONK! This isn't HONK! funny HONK!"

Arthur was laughing so hard he had to hold onto Molly to stay upright. Molly was trying very hard not to smile and failing miserably.

Bill walked in last. His head was shaved, his feet were bare and his bright orange robe was quite becoming.

That was it. Ginny, Hermione, Arthur and Molly broke down in peals of laughter.

Bill looked scornfully at them before saying, "What is this laughter, what is this delight, forever burning as you are? Enveloped in darkness as you are, will you not look for a lamp?"

The three of them continued to laugh, even Ron joined in. Finally, Molly collected herself long enough to asked, "But Harry dear, what about Ronald?"

Harry grinned evilly. "Hermione is going to handle that particular chore personally."

Ron gulped and looked nervously at Hermione, who glared back at him.

"Harry how long will they remain like this?" Arthur asked, wiping tears from his face.

Harry suddenly looked sheepish. "You know Arthur, I was so annoyed by what they'd done that I don't remember if I used the two week or four week version of the spell!"

Percy looked at Harry, his eyes bugling. "What's done cannot be undone?"

Fred honked sadly and one of George's breasts suddenly deflated with a loud flatulent sound.

The rest of the family howled with laughter.

Chapter 3 - A Series of Firsts

The Burrow...

Life settled once again into a routine after Ginny's birthday. Molly enacted her own punishment on Ron by giving him a bulk of the chores to do. Ginny became accustomed to her new ring and her new status, at least among her family.

Ginny's OWL results and Hogwarts letter arrived the day after her birthday. The breakup at the Ministry had extended all the way down into the Testing department, which resulted in a delay in getting the OWLs sent out. Ginny had managed a very respectable ten owls, including an outstanding in potions, charms, transfiguration and defense.

Ron, Hermione and Harry had also received their letters from Hogwarts. Ron had managed to retain good enough grades to keep his position as Captain of the Quidditch Team, Hermione had made Head Girl. Harry's letter was much longer than the others and quite a surprise even to him.

Harry,

As we are both aware of the coming troubles this year, and in keeping with your desire to expand and improve on your DA Group, the Board of Governors, in agreement with myself, have decided to formally add your training to the course load for the school under the Defense Against the Dark Arts subject. It will be called Advanced Defense and will be offered to all students, fourth years and up. Minister Bones is considering having this added to the roles of NEWTS as well.

Professors Snape and Professor Parsons will be the prime instructors for this class, while you will fill the role of Assistant Professor. You will hold all the rights and privileges of a full Professor, including assigning work, deducting house points or assigning detentions. You will, however, continue to remain with your classmates and stay in your house Dormitory.

In addition to the people you will be training, Professor Parsons has worked out a training schedule for Director Shacklebolt that should allow for 200 to 300 people to complete in time. That training will be accomplished at the Auror academy, although it is possible you may be asked to visit there from time to time to assist in their training.

As much as I would have liked to offer you the position, with these additional responsibilities I could not, in all fairness, offer you the position of Head Boy for your seventh year. For that, I am sorry.

Finally, if you will allow me, I would so like to help you with your own personal training this year. I think it might be best that you plan on arriving at Hogwarts, or at least visiting, two days prior to the start of term. Please bring a complete list of the existing DA Spells, as Professor Snape will need to look them over for the younger years.

Sincerely,
Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster, Hogwarts

Harry sat back in his chair. Assistant Professor?

Ginny looked up from her owl results. "Harry? What's wrong?"

Wordlessly, he handed her his letter while shaking his head. Her eyes widened as she read it, then passed it to Hermione.

"Professor Potter, is it?" Ginny asked with a smirk.

"Yeah, and if you're not careful, it means detention with your favorite Professor," He said with a grin.

"OH! Harry, this is such an honor!" Hermione breathed.

Harry winced at her reaction.

It was also a day of reconciliation for Harry and Ginny. One by one, the Weasley brothers had shown up to beg forgiveness of Ginny. Harry sat stonily, waiting until each one managed to convince their sister they were truly sorry for what they had done.

Fred and George were fairly easy, if a little crazy, in their apology. Percy's apology lasted for hours and, by the time he had finished, everyone was confused. Bill's apology was the shortest because no one understood anything he was saying. As Ginny relented, Harry changed them back with a warning that if they ever hurt her again, he wouldn't be so nice next time.

When it was all done, only Ron remained in the doghouse, despite his multiple apologies.

Two days after Ginny's birthday, she was sitting in the living room with Harry and Hermione. Harry was checking the notes he had made from the book he took from the Headmaster's Library. He frowned and started thumbing through the book again.

Hermione looked up from the scroll she and Ginny were reading through. Seeing his expression, she asked, "Harry, you're scowling like a thundercloud. What's bothering you?"

"It's this dang book 'Mione." He held up the volume, 'The Geologic Properties of Magic'.

"The book has a drawing, which looks like that crystal I saw in my vision, but it says next to nothing about it. It gives it a name, and says it was used in ancient rituals for the dead a long time ago. Something tells me this is very important, but I've reached a dead end over it!"

"What does the book call it Harry?" Hermione asked.

"It's called Spiritus Crystalus." Seeing she was taking notes, he spelt out the words for her.

"Hmm, are you sure about that last word Harry? Crystalus would be a crystal, but Crystallus would be a cup or container of some kind," she commented, taking notes.

"No, the book clearly shows it with only one 'l' at the end."

"Well, it's not much to go on. It's clearly Latin though. 'Spiritus Crystalus' means Spirit Crystal or Stone. I'll add it to my list of things to do and see what I can come up with. You know, we've never bothered checking the library at Grimmauld Place. That library is full of Dark Art books. We might find something of use there, as well."

Harry stood up and walked over to Hermione to look at her 'To do list'. It was quite long and, way down at the bottom of her list, was a notation about wandless magic. He smacked himself in the forehead.

"Oh damn, 'Mione! I'm sorry. I completely forgot about my promise to help you with that. Let's see if we can do something about it right now."

She looked puzzled. "Harry, what are you on about now?"

"Wandless Magic. I promised to try to help you with that, remember? Let's try a few things."

He pulled over a chair and sat down in front of her on the couch. As she eyed him, Ginny leaned back on the couch to watch.

"All right. Pull out your wand and give it a swish, no incantation, just your basic swish," he told her.

She swished her wand and it left a trail of sparkles. It was the standard test Mr. Ollivander used to see if the wand and witch were compatible.

"Now, close your eyes and give it another swish."

Again the wand left a trail of sparkles.

"You can open your eyes 'Mione. May I see your wand for a moment?"

She handed him her wand. With the exception of Hermione, all of Harry's friends had mastered some degree of wandless magic. Ron and Ginny were the strongest, capable of casting some powerful spells wandlessly. But Hermione had never gotten over the need to use a wand.

Harry made a show of examining Hermione's wand before turning his attention back to her again.

"Mione, I want you to close your eyes and concentrate on the feeling you had when you swished your wand. Think about the magic flowing through you. Really concentrate on it."

Harry winked at Ginny and then he conjured a feather duster with the same grip as Hermione's wand. Placing the duster into Hermione's hand, he continued to talk to her.

"Concentrate on the feeling, remember how good it felt? Once you've got that feeling firmly locked in your mind, give your wand a few swishes and open your eyes."

Hermione swished her wand three times, nothing happened on the first swish, nothing happened on the second swish, on the third swish she felt the magic move through her again. She opened her eyes and looked at the trail of sparkles. Harry and Ginny were smiling broadly at her. Harry waved. Wait...

Harry waved her wand at her! But that would mean... She looked down at her hand and gasped. She was holding a feather duster!

"H-H-Harry what does this mean?" She stammered.

"It means, oh sister of mine, that you can do wandless magic. The problem is, sometimes you're too literal. You've allowed yourself to block the ability because every book you've read has said the wand is important. It's not really that important 'Mione. It acts as a focal point for your magic, but you can just as easily channel the magic through your hand without it. I told you to concentrate on feelings and that's what you need to work on.

"Sis, Ginny will tell you, I'm not so good with feelings. Either I feel some things way too much, or way too little, but it's feelings that help us channel the magic. Your learning makes you a powerful witch, probably the smartest one of the age, but sometimes you need to put the books and logic aside and go with your heart."

Harry waved a hand and suddenly Ginny was surrounded by butterflies. With another wave, all but one was gone and it landed on her shoulder. Ginny smiled back at him. He looked back over to the stunned Hermione.

"Hermione, what you did here just showed you that the wand isn't where your magic comes from. You may never get to be as powerful as Ron or Ginny, but I think, given time, you'll be able to do this. Just concentrate on your feelings."

When he handed her back the wand, she slid it into her holster and dropped the feather duster onto the table. Then she launched herself at Harry and hugged him tightly.

Harry chuckled inwardly. She's probably already putting together a training plan involving her wand and that feather duster, he thought. But now that she knows she can do it, she'll break the block.

"Thank you Harry. You have no idea how it felt to be the only one among us unable to do wandless magic," she said with a smile.

He smiled. "No, you're right about that. Now, not to change the topic or anything but about Ron..."

Hermione frowned at Harry.

"Look, I know what he did deserves punishment, but I've thought about it 'Mione. It's not fair to you. Maybe you should start easing up on him. I honestly don't think he and his brothers did it to be malicious, they just thought they were being funny. Don't get me wrong, I was seriously pissed at them and, to an extent, still am. But it's not fair to you. I see the looks you give Gin and I when we're holding each other and I can see

this is hurting you. So do yourselves a favor and start easing off. Just make him understand that he hurt Ginny bad. I won't put up with that from anyone, not even him."

Ginny looked over at Harry. "Oh, so you're my protector now Mr. Potter?"

He looked thoughtful for a moment. "Gin, I pity any Death Eater that tries to take you on, but this was different. Ron's family, and because of that, he has ways of hurting you deep down where it really matters. I think you know what I mean, love. As much as I'd like to, I can't protect you from everything. And while I'm sure you have no problems handling your brothers, I just wanted them to understand that they now have both of us to deal with."

Ginny had to think about that. She didn't want Harry getting all protective over her, but what he said did make sense to her. Smiling to let him know she understood, she went back to studying the scroll Hermione and she had been working on.

A few minutes later, Hermione decided to floo to Grimmauld and check the library over there. Harry shrugged and went back to his notes.

Later that same day...

Ron was busy working on the old stone fence that surrounded the property. Molly had told him not to use magic, and had already caught him at it a few times. So here he was, under the hot sun, restacking the stones by hand.

He watched as Hermione, carrying a tray, left the house and walked towards him. He knew he was in for another tongue lashing, but he'd also figured out that, what had seemed funny at the time had actually been hurtful to both Ginny and Harry. He was sorry about it, but no one seemed interested in hearing his apologies. Least of all Hermione.

Hermione stopped a few feet away from him. "Ronald," she said softly.

He winced. "Are you here to yell at me again 'Mione? I said I was sorry."

"No Ron, I'm not here to yell at you. As long as you know how much you hurt your sister, I'm not going to harp on it anymore. I've brought you something cold to drink."

He looked up at the ice filled drink she offered him and eagerly accepted it. Downing more than half the glass, he handed it back to her. "Thanks 'Mione. It's been a scorcher out here today."

"Your Mum isn't going to be as forgiving as I am, but if you wouldn't mind the company, I'll sit out here with you while you work. I'll even make sure you have something cool to drink."

Realizing he wasn't completely out of the doghouse, he smiled at her gratefully. "I'd like that. I'd like that a lot."

She smiled back and cast a cooling charm on him to make the work a little easier.

Weasleys Wizarding Warbangers...

Fred and George looked proudly at the new building. They had the entire top floor of the new construction set up as a laboratory. There was plenty of space out back to make product tests, and it was pretty isolated.

The two Weasleys were ecstatic. Harry's offer had allowed them to expand enormously and they were experimenting with some truly dangerous substances. Not that they minded, of course. Boys being boys, the twins thought anything that went 'boom' was fun.

Fred had been tinkering with the portable swamp idea, trying to make throw-able quicksand, while George finished filling out the last of the Ministry forms they needed to send off. George was planning to look into the problem of delivering their products safely to their targets.

They had already delivered several prototype devices to Remus, who was showing them to Jack Parsons. Lack of feedback hadn't stopped the two from inventing, however. Besides, they were having a blast!

Grimmauld Place, a few days later...

Professor Dumbledore presided over a general meeting of the Order of the Phoenix. He had a lot of things on his mind, some of which he planned on sharing with the members tonight. Right now however, he needed to pay attention to what Remus was saying.

"... And that is about it for that particular topic. Now, I'd like to bring up a report we have from one of our field members. I find its implications disturbing, if true. This report comes from Charlie Weasley. He reports that there is a significant decrease in Dark Wizard activity in Romania. Attach this to his earlier report of two separate sightings of Pettigrew in Romania, and I think we can draw a conclusion that Wormtail may be out recruiting for Voldemort.

"We have similar reports from other field members and, if accurate, the numbers are truly disturbing. It's just a preliminary guess, but it suggests he may be able to call up double what he hit Hogsmeade with."

People around the room gasped at that.

"What about the Aurors?" asked Arthur Weasley.

Hestia Jones, who was sitting in on the meeting tonight at the request of Director Shacklebolt, replied, "Currently we have less than 100 fully effective Aurors. We have another 200 in training, which, I might add, has detracted from our list of effectives. In addition, we have some 300 volunteers for the Auror Battle group that Jack Parsons," she nodded to the squib warmly, "has helped us set up training for. Jack has brought in several muggles as 'consultants' I believe his term was, who are handling most of the physical aspects of the training. The magical aspects will be handled by Aurors, and overseen by Mr. Potter."

"Harry? But he's just a kid!" shouted another member. Several other Order members started shouting questions.

Dumbledore looked out over the table calmly, and then rapped his knuckles on the table. "Quiet, quiet please," he said.

As the room quieted, he continued. "You will note that Mr. Potter is not present with us tonight. I specifically did not invite him because Harry is not an Order member. However, I'm about to share with you information that you must know.

"The Order of the Phoenix is an old organization, far older than many suspect. In some ways, it predates even Hogwarts. While most of you felt the need to join the Order as a way of combating Voldemort, our original charter has always been to help guide the Wizarding World during dark times such as these. But we also work to keep our government aligned with the light. Many times in the Order's history we've brought down governments that were too oppressive on the Wizarding world, as well as our muggle counterpart.

"In the past year, our job has been done by one man. Yes, I will call him a man, despite his youth. Harry Potter is leading this fight. He is not a member of this organization and, to be honest, I'm not sure he wants

to be. Many months ago he offered to ally himself with the Order, not join. And had not been for him and his companions, many of us would not be here today.

"Perhaps someday Harry will be a member of our Order. It would not surprise me to find he comes to lead it, eventually. But understand this. This is his fight and he's leading it, his way. Prophecy says that no one else but him can lead it. Our job is to support him in any way we can. Harry is quickly coming to a confrontation between himself and Voldemort. At that point, both will be equal or nearly equal in power. If Harry survives, his power will most likely continue to increase for a number of years."

"The rules are changing right under our feet. If the Order is to survive, we must make ourselves useful to Harry. To that end, Remus, I want you to begin giving Harry a weekly talk on what we think is going on. We must become Harry's eyes and ears, while he concentrates on the coming fight."

The room was silent as many of the members present considered Dumbledore's words carefully. Remus leaned back and hid a smile. The old man is finally getting the idea, he thought.

"Remus, do you have any more to report?" asked Dumbledore.

"We've picked up some whispers that Voldemort is planning something for September or October, but nothing more definitive than that. There's been some increased Death Eater sightings in Knockturn Alley. The problem is, we really have no clear idea how many Death Eaters Voldemort currently has in the country. His attack on Harry this past July suggested a switch from outright attacks to more stealthy plans. But that's clouded by the attack on the Fudge Family mansion, which was clearly a regular Death Eater attack. Other than that Professor, no I've nothing more to add."

"Very well then," Dumbledore said. "Unless there is more business to deal with, this meeting is adjourned,"

The Apparation test, the next morning...

Harry awoke and, gently prying his arm out from under Ginny, got up. She had come to his bedroom again last night and he was glad she had. They had snuggled and talked of plans for their future for a number of hours, before finally drifting off to sleep in each other's arms.

Today he had to get up early. Remus was coming to take him for his apparition license test. He kissed Ginny and headed out to take his morning shower. Ginny just snuggled under the blankets and smiled softly, not even waking up.

After he was showered and dressed, he went downstairs to find Remus already waiting for him with Molly.

"Remus, what are you doing here so early?"

"Well Harry, you're going up against the Ministry today. That means filling out lots of forms, and then sitting around waiting. If I know them, you'll fill out all your forms and end up having to wait 'til afternoon before they begin your test."

Harry grimaced at that idea, then sighed. "Molly, I guess Remus is right. We best be off."

He gave Molly a kiss on the cheek before following Remus out. They planned on apparating to Grimmauld Place. From there, they would take a muggle taxi to the Ministry.

Like his previous visits to the Ministry, he received a badge. This time it read: 'Harry Potter, APPARATION TEST'. Remus smirked as the security guard made a big deal over Harry's wand before finally allowing them in.

As Remus predicted, they entered a small office with a glass window, behind which sat some clerks. Harry went up to the counter and filled out several forms before seating himself next to his friend.

Above the glass window was a sign giving the room's coordinates and a warning to new testers to memorize them. Below the sign was another for Dimitri's Desplinching Clinic. Harry found that more than a little ominous.

The pair sat, watching people go into the testing room and coming out. Harry knew several of the people being tested, as they too were students at Hogwarts. Most of the people came out from their test very happy to have passed.

There was only one case of mild splinching that Harry saw. A middle-aged man stumbled out with his feet on backwards and was escorted to the Desplinching Clinic by a harried looking official. However, not everyone who entered the room came out, leaving Harry to wonder if some of the more serious splinches were sent directly to Dimitri.

He and Remus chatted about a number of topics while he waited for his name to be called. This was, in his opinion, bureaucracy at it's finest. After three hours of waiting, his name was called.

"Harry Potter. Next! Step up to the door and enter."

When his name was called, everyone in the waiting room turned to stare at him. Harry felt like he was on display. He walked over to the door and entered the test room.

"Welcome to your Apparation test. I'm Examiner Applebee and I'll be the one testing you today Mr. er..." He checked his list and looked up at Harry with a stunned expression.

"Mr. Potter! What a pleasure sir!"

Harry just rolled his eyes.

"If you'll follow me down the corridor Mr. Potter, we can begin once we get to the testing area."

He followed Applebee down the corridor into a huge room. It looked like it could have been a warehouse at one time, but the insides had been gutted. The room was painted off in large square regions and letters on the wall identified each square.

"Now then Mr. Potter, if you would be so kind as to join me in the square labeled M?" With that, Applebee apparated with a loud pop.

Harry looked around the room and spotted Applebee, waving at him from the far side of the room. Harry concentrated for a second and vanished with a soft pop.

"Quite good Mr. Potter. Now if you would apperate to J, please."

Harry looked around again and spotted the J. With another soft pop, he was gone. Applebee met up with him there.

"Astounding Mr. Potter. You make very little noise when you apperate. Excellent! Most excellent. Now, apperate to T, please."

When Applebee joined him once more, he handed Harry a slip of parchment, saying, "Mr. Potter, you've passed the first section of the test with excellent results. Now, we'll see how well you do with long distance apperation. The parchment I gave you has two coordinate pairs on it. I will meet you at the first set of coordinates. The second coordinate pair is for our emergency pickup room. If you splinch yourself, or you

come out anywhere else and do not see me, apparate to the second coordinate pair. Wait two minutes after I apparate out before you begin."

Applebee gestured to a timer on the wall and it began a two-minute countdown and then he apparated out with a pop.

Harry looked at the coordinates. He hadn't done much coordinate apparating, but the process was easy enough for him. As the timer countdown hit zero, he vanished with a faint pop.

He arrived in a meadow. Applebee was standing only a few feet away.

He made a notation on his clipboard, and smiled, saying, "Excellent Mr. Potter! Now, if you check your parchment, you'll find our last coordinate point for your test. Follow me as soon as you've read it."

Applebee vanished with a loud pop. Harry checked his parchment. The first set of coordinates changed again to a new set. Harry read the numbers and vanished again with a soft pop.

The Burrow...

Molly, Ginny and Hermione were busy putting together lunch. Hermione wasn't a good cook and Molly used her time at the Burrow to instruct the girl in some of the finer points of life as a married witch. She loved Hermione like a daughter. Since Ron had given her a promise ring, Molly knew that, someday, she would truly be a daughter. As such, she wanted to make sure Hermione would be able to care for Ron and their children properly.

Suddenly an alarm started blaring. All three women froze at the sound, then paled and turned to the family clock. As all three women watched, Harry's hand went from "In Transit" to "MORTAL DANGER".

A few moments later the clock changed again, this time to "WOUNDED".

Attacked...

Harry appeared in the new apparation point and his right arm burst into flames. With a scream, he dove to the ground and rolled, smothering the flames just as three killing curses whizzed over his head.

Harry cast a shield and bit his lip against the pain in his right arm. Looking around, he saw Applebee down in the grass, maybe dead. He looked up as five Death Eaters exited the tree line and started walking towards him. He realized the Death Eaters must have thought he'd been hit otherwise they wouldn't be so casual in their approach.

Harry fired off a reducto spell, which hit the center Death Eater. His body arched backwards a good thirty feet before slamming up against a tree. Harry stood, his right arm too painful to use, and started exchanging spells with the other Death Eaters.

Many of their spells splashed harmlessly against his shield, but they were mixing Unforgiveables in their casting. Harry dodged another killing curse, then brought down two Death Eaters with his high powered bludgeoning spell. The remaining two tried to apparate away, but Harry had cast an anti-apparation hex on them. They weren't going anywhere.

He dove to the ground, rolling on his arm and screaming in pain as he dodged two well-placed killing hexes. When both men cast shields, Harry tried Hermione's new spell. Spear of fury, she called it.

A white lance of light shot out from his hand. It plowed into and through the shield of one man, knocking him to the ground. The remaining Death Eater, seeing his partner hit the dirt, did the smart thing and dropped his wand. Harry hit him with a Stupefy and then bound him in an Incarcerous spell.

Standing warily, he went to check on Applebee. The man was alive, but hurt badly. Summoning the wands from the Death Eaters, Harry knew he had limited time. He sealed the major bleeds on Applebee, then went to check on the Death Eaters. Only one was still alive, the one who surrendered by dropping his wand. Harry levitated the Death Eater over to Applebee.

Harry had to get Applebee to a healer! He had no choice but to attempt a multiple apparition with the two men as passengers. He conjured a rope between the two men and managed to tie them together by their ankles, despite the pain in his arm.

Looking around for the parchment with the coordinates for the Emergency Pickup room, he finally spotted it in the trampled grass. Picking it up, he cursed silently to himself. It was burned, the coordinates gone. He had no choice but to apparate to the waiting room.

Walking back to the two men and grabbing the rope, he pushed back the pain and concentrated. He was still for a moment, and then he and the two men vanished with a loud, crackling sound.

The Burrow...

The clock stayed at "WOUNDED" for a long time before it changed to "IN TRANSIT" again.

The three of them looked at each other. With Harry on the move, they could only pray for the best.

The Ministry, Apparation License Office...

He reappeared in the waiting room, totally exhausted and swaying. Someone screamed and there were shouts to get an Auror and a healer. Harry swayed dangerously and would have fallen over, but Remus caught him and helped him slide down to the floor, his back against a wall.

"Merlin Harry! What happened?"

"Death Eaters at the last point, Remus. Mr. Applebee needs a healer..." As the adrenalin ebbed from his system Harry started to tremble as the pain in his arm flared.

Remus looked at Harry's right arm. "You need a healer also, Harry!"

At that point an Auror stepped up. "We have healers on the way, but it would be a big help if Mr. Potter could provide a memory of what happened in a Pensieve."

When Remus snarled at the Auror to wait, Harry placed a hand on his friend's shoulder and told him it was all right. Wanting to argue, but knowing it would be useless, he helped Harry extract the memory and place it into a small Pensieve the Auror offered.

"I only brought back the Death Eater that surrendered. There are four more still back at that apparition point."

The Auror looked startled by this. "You left four Death Eaters behind?"

"Well they aren't going anywhere, are they? Unless someone can bring back the dead, that is," he said with a grimace.

Someone, presumably a healer, checked on Applebee, then they both portkeyed away. The Auror nodded grimly, then stepped aside so another healer could work on Harry's arm. The healer tore away his shirt and examined his arm. Harry breathed a sigh of relief as the healer spread a pain killing salve onto his wound.

"It's not as bad as I first thought it might be Mr. Potter," the healer said. "You've got mostly first degree burns and some second degree, mostly from your shoulder to your forearm. You should be fine in a day or two. Have your regular healer give you some salve for the pain for the next two days and you'll be as good as new."

Another man approached and handed Remus a slip of paper and a small card. Remus looked at both and said, "Apparently Examiner Applebee expected you to pass your test Harry. He'd already filled out the test results as passed, so you've gotten your license."

Harry looked at him with exhausted eyes. "That's good Remus, but can we floo home? I'm too tired to do anything else today."

Remus used the floo in a nearby office. He had to support Harry as he stepped into the floo with a shout of, "The Burrow!"

The Burrow...

The clock finally moved back to "AT HOME" and the alarm ceased. All three of them waited fearfully.

"MOLLY!" Remus shouted as he brought Harry home through the floo and helped him to the couch.

The young man was a mess. His shirt was torn away from his arm and shoulder. He had grass in his hair and dirt on his pants. Not that he cared. Once on the couch, he stretched out and was asleep within seconds.

Molly, Ginny and Hermione rushed to the living room from the kitchen and stopped just inside. Harry was laying on the couch, apparently asleep, one arm bandaged from his forearm to nearly his shoulder. Remus put a finger to his lips for silence.

Remus strode over to them and spoke in a hushed tone. "He's all right. Death Eaters attacked him during the last part of his apparition test. He's got a burn on his arm that's not too bad, but I think we'll call Poppy in to look at it. Right now, he's mostly exhausted. He apparated, carrying two other men."

Molly looked to Ginny and Hermione before speaking. "Hermione, use the floo to contact Professor Dumbledore. Tell him what Remus said and ask if Madam Pomfrey can come check him. Ginny, we'll need to conjure up some bandages. Remus, are you sure he'll be ok there?"

"Yes Molly. Right now he needs sleep more than anything else."

"Fine. Hermione, make that call, and then go tell Ron what's happening so he doesn't come barging in here, making a racket. When you're done with that, join us in the kitchen."

Hermione went over to the floo while Molly hustled the other two into the kitchen and put on a pot of tea.

The three sat silently for a while, lost in their individual thoughts. After what seemed like a long wait Professor Dumbledore entered the room and said, "Poppy is checking him over now Molly, but she didn't seem overly concerned. I have asked your wife to look into this Remus, to see what information she can find out."

Hermione came in from the back door. "Ron knows. He'll be quiet entering the house."

Molly nodded absently. A short while later Madam Pomfrey walked in and took a seat. She placed a small pot of salve on the table. Molly set a cup of tea before the medi-witch as Poppy started to speak.

"He's going to be fine Molly. The burn isn't bad. It will hurt him a lot today and tonight, but the salve will take care of it. By the day after tomorrow, he'll never even know he was burned. He's exhausted and sleeping, but I suspect he'll wake in a few hours when the pain relieving effects of the salve wears off. He might want to go back to sleep. If he does, let him, it won't hurt him. This salve will get him through tonight and tomorrow. He shouldn't need it by tomorrow afternoon."

Molly reached out to take the salve when Ginny snatched from the table. She gave her Mum a defiant look, but softened it when Molly smiled at her. At that moment, there was a noise from the living room and Tonks came tip toeing into the kitchen.

"Hey, did you know Harry's asleep on the couch?" Tonks asked. "He never even stirred when I tripped over the coffee table."

While Tonks took a seat next to Ginny, she and Hermione rolled their eyes. Tonk's clumsiness had become legendary.

Dumbledore leaned forward. "Well? What have you found out, Tonks?"

"Oh, right! Well, the four dead ones had no identification on them, so we're sort of stuck on them for the moment. The live one isn't English, he's French. When I left headquarters, he wasn't talking. They're planning on giving him veritaserum in a bit. St. Mungos says Harry probably saved the life of that Examiner. Right now, the general thinking is that Harry was set up. Someone on the inside alerted the Death Eaters to his presence today and found out his apparition coordinates."

Tonks looked around at everyone. She had, in a few breathless sentences, summed up a life and death situation like she was talking about a Quidditch match. Her eyes bulged when she looked at the ring on Ginny's hand.

"Cor! Look at that rock! Ginny, that's gorgeous! Did he get down on his knees? Was it romantic?" she asked.

Ginny proceeded to tell the tale. She loved reliving that moment and was more than willing to share it with Tonks. When she got to the part about the fairy lights, she looked at Dumbledore suspiciously.

Dumbledore twinkled at her, then said. "Yes, Miss Weasley, I did see you arrive. The astronomy tower has been used as a proposal spot for nearly a thousand years. Although I daresay there have been more babies conceived up there than proposals."

He glanced at Molly and she turned beat red. Ginny looked startled at her mum's reaction, then she started to giggle. Hermione looked shocked.

Dumbledore and Poppy left shortly afterwards. Remus and Tonks were invited to stay for dinner.

Arthur arrived home at his usual time and, over dinner, he told the family that the Ministry was in an uproar over what had happened. Aurors were investigating and interrogating people, trying to find the person that leaked the information.

Half way through dinner, Harry stumbled into the kitchen. Molly jumped to her feet and led him over to a chair.

"How are you feeling, Harry?" she asked.

"It's not too bad now Molly. Thanks for asking."

Ginny got up from her chair and took a long look in his eyes. "Love, it's ok to tell people when you're hurting. I can see you're in pain just by looking at you. Now sit still and I'll change the bandage and salve for you."

The burns on his arm looked like a severe sunburn now, with only a few blisters remaining. When she was done he let out a sigh of relief and his body relaxed. Before she could turn away, he grabbed her hand and kissed it. She looked into his eyes and saw his gratitude.

"Harry, can I get you something to eat?" Molly asked.

Harry nodded vigorously, and let go of Ginny's hand. He'd had nothing to eat all day. Noticing Remus and Tonks eyeing him, he grinned.

"I thought I heard Auntie Tonks tripping on her way in," he said, innocently.

Tonks frowned at him, but decided to let him live, this time.

Remus leaned forward at the table. "Harry, how much do you remember?"

His brow furrowed. "Pretty much all of it, Remus. I remember being attacked as soon as I apparated in. When I rolled to put out the flames, a couple of killing curses flew over my head. After that, it was your standard fight. They got arrogant, then stupid, then they lost. Had they stayed in the tree line they would have had a better chance, but all five of them waltzed out. They must have thought I was hit by one of their curses."

"That reminds me," he said, turning to Hermione. "If the other side ever gets our shields, we'll be in a tight bind. I want something that can either circumvent our own shields, or force them down early."

She summoned her To Do list and jotted that down. "I think I may have an answer for that already, Harry. I have several candidate spells taken from the Headmaster's office that may do the trick. Oh, I forgot to tell you. I've been over to Grimmauld Place, checking out the library. I found one volume you might be interested in, and an old journal by Phineas Black, who mentioned moving some of the more interesting, but dangerous books to the Black family heirloom vault. I know Ginny would kill me if I gave you that book tonight, so I'll give it to her instead and you can get it from her later."

Harry looked up from shoveling the stew Molly had giving him into his mouth. "Well the heirloom vault is no problem, we'll check that this weekend." Looking over to Molly. "We're still going to Diagon Alley this weekend, right?"

"Yes, dear. Madam Pomfrey tells me you should be all healed by the day after tomorrow. She said that tonight will be painful, but we'll be able to put new salve on the burn every four hours. By tomorrow afternoon the pain should be gone."

Later that night, Ginny stepped into Harry's room while he was getting undressed. He looked at her and grinned. "Are you here to help me get undressed love?"

"No, your hands are fine. But in about an hour you're going to be wanting another application of the salve."

"A whole hour, eh? How do you suggest we spend that time?" he asked suggestively, as he slipped under the blankets.

She dropped her robe, revealing a rather attractive nightshirt that buttoned up the front, and slid under the blankets on the side away from his hurt arm. She laid her head on his shoulder and draped an arm across his chest. He leaned over and kissed her.

Thirty minutes later, Harry leaned back and looked down at her. A single ever-lasting candle lit the room, bathing her in soft light. She had released several buttons on her nightshirt, hoping to give him greater access. With a soft smile, he kissed the tip of her nose.

"Don't think I don't know what you're up to Ginevra," he whispered, huskily.

"Oh? And what would that be," She whispered back to him, a smile playing on her face.

"You've bewitched me, and you've been wearing me down all summer, especially these last few weeks."

"Oh really, Mr. Potter?"

He leaned down to kiss her cheek before saying softly, "Yes Gin, and if it weren't for this damn burn, I'd give you want you've been wanting tonight."

His eyes sparkled at her as she hitched in her breath. "Really Harry? Don't fool with me on this. Do you really mean it?"

"I mean it Gin. You know how badly I want you, and this past summer has been hard on me." He winced slightly at his own pun before adding, "I wanted to wait until I had proposed. There's so much of my life that's been put on hold because of what I have to do, but I'm not willing to put this part on hold any longer." His voice dropped to a husky whisper. "I want you Gin, I need you. Does that make me selfish? I don't know, but I don't want to wait any longer."

"No love, it doesn't make you selfish. I've been trying to get you to stop waiting all year. I want you, I've wanted you all year."

"Well, the next time you crawl into my bed I intend to surprise you. Although, I might suggest you wait 'til we've hit Diagon Alley. I read that the first time might hurt for you and I don't want you hurting on our day out."

She reached up and gently touched his cheek. Then she noticed him starting to tense.

"Harry, sit up and let me change out that bandage. It's time for it to be changed anyway."

Once done, they curled up together and slept. Ginny seemed to know, instinctively, when it was time to change the bandage. She had new bandages and the salve ready when he woke up four hours later.

The Chang Family Residence...

Cho Chang was in a rage once again. She'd gotten another rejection on a job application. If she didn't find work or a husband soon, she would have little choice but to go to work in the family business, something that she didn't want to do.

Wan listened to her big sister impassively, but she considered the injustice brought down on her family by Harry Potter. Danny was right! That good for nothing half blood was responsible for doing this to her sister and her family. The shame of this dishonor!

As usual, the thought of Danny drove her to other, less pure thoughts. Danny was an attentive and caring person. They'd recently become lovers, and she was thrilled by that prospect. He was so handsome and so kind. Wan wasn't nearly as pretty as Cho and she was extremely flattered when the handsome Danny started to court her.

At first she couldn't understand it, but now she accepted him as an integral part of her life. And he was so smart! He knew all about full bloods, half bloods and mud bloods! He pointed out the many slights that Harry

Potter had done to her family and to Cho. Some of which even Cho had missed. Deep down inside her, anger and deep resentment flowered for Harry Potter and his friends.

She'd do anything for Danny. Her Danny! Just two more years and she'd be of age and they would get married. He'd promised her that, the first time they'd made love.

Somewhere in England, location unknown...

Voldemort was weary, but elated. He had just finished marking another batch of foreign recruits that Wormtail had sent him. He must think of a suitable reward for him. For once, Wormtail had performed superbly.

Several of his servants stood nearby, waiting to give their own reports. He raised a gaunt finger at one.

The man scurried forward and knelt at his feet.

"Report," he said in a deceptively soft tone.

"My position in the Ministry enabled me to pass along the information about Potter's test. Also, I have been able to release a number of cursed objects into the muggle community. My position in the Office of Misuse of Muggle Artifacts makes such releases extremely easy. Finally my lord, I've seen the permit applications for a new business that I think should not be allowed to continue. With your permission, I will take a few servants to see to that," said the Death Eater.

"And your other project?" asked Voldemort.

"It is going even better than I expected my lord. I have reason to believe I will not even need to use an Imperio curse on my subject."

Voldemort cackled evilly before reply, "Well done my servant. I am pleased. Take what servants you need and see to this business you talked about."

The man scurried back to his position. Voldemort turned to another figure who moved forward and groveled in front of him.

"Report," said Voldemort.

"As ordered my lord, we sent five servants to intercept Potter during his test. None of the servants have returned. I fear they may have been captured or killed."

Voldemort raised his cadaverous hand and pointed his wand. "CRUCIO!" he snarled.

The screams went on for a long time.

Diagon Alley...

The four friends took the floo to the Leaky Cauldron where Remus and Tonks were waiting for them. Molly went on to Grimmauld Place to do some work for the Order while Remus and Tonks rode herd on the four of them.

Their first stop was Gringotts, to check out the Black Family Heirloom vault. Like the last time, he asked for Griphook.

Griphook appeared a short while later and gave Harry a big toothy grin. "Mr. Potter, how can I be of service to you today?"

"Hello Griphook. I hope all is well with you. If possible, can you take myself and my friends to vault 47 please?"

"Certainly Mr. Potter. It's always doing a pleasure assisting you!"

This vault was close enough that no cart was needed. They walked down two flights of stairs and down a corridor. Upon reaching the vault, the doors quivered for a moment before opening. Harry was not related to the Black family by blood, but he was the legal heir and it took a moment for the doors to recognize him as such.

The vault was filled with all sorts of furniture and literally hundreds of books. Everyone expressed dismay upon seeing stack after stack of tomes.

It was Remus who saved the day by finding a nearly empty trunk. Unloading its contents, Remus and Harry shrunk the books as people passed them over. Half full of hundreds of volumes, Remus then reduced the trunk to the size of a small book and handed it to Hermione. She'd be able to go through them at her leisure.

As they were getting ready to leave the vault Griphook spoke said, "Mr. Potter, if your schedule permits, Director Ragnot has asked to have a word with you before you leave."

Harry looked at Remus, who could only shrug in bewilderment. The director of Gringots almost never met with any of the wizards.

"We'd be honored to meet with him, Griphook," replied Harry.

Griphook led them up a different staircase and into a plush office. "Please, be seated. Director Ragnot will be with you shortly."

After a brief wait, Ragnot stepped into the room. Goblins didn't shake hands as a customary greeting, so he didn't offer. He merely went to his desk and took his seat.

"Mr. Potter, it is a pleasure to finally meet with you."

Remus and Sirius had schooled Harry in Goblin etiquette, so he knew not to call the director by his title.

"The pleasure is all mine Ragnot. I've always been most impressed with Gringots."

Ragnot smiled toothily at him.

"Mr. Potter, we are well aware of your involvement in the incident at Hogsmeade. And, more importantly, we have reviewed our records of all your transactions and interactions with our establishment. This is why I wished to meet with you today."

"From your first dealings with Gringots, to your dealings with us today, you have treated us as equals and with respect. Few wizards seem to be so inclined to do so."

"We know your stand against the Dark Lord. This is why we'd like you to know that his minions have approached us for support, which we have declined. To be frank, we see little value in supporting him. It is our wish that, should you win against the Dark Lord, you may see fit to publicly set an example to the Wizarding community at large about treating us with more respect than they currently do."

Harry thought about that for a moment. "Ragnot, I have to be honest with you. I do not know how much value people will put into what I do. But I have never understood the reasons for treating the other magical

races the way they do. I'll make you this promise though. If I'm able to, I'll do all I can to help you, as will my friends. The Wizarding Community owes Gringots a debt, as do I. Your help and assistance while I learned to manage my estate was invaluable."

Ragnot grinned widely. "Thank you, Mr. Potter. It is refreshing to hear a Wizard say those words. We cannot promise you much in the way of support, but we will do what we can. Please feel free to call on me if you need anything."

A moment later Griphook opened a door and started to escort them out.

Before Harry could leave the room, Ragnot called to him softly. "Mr. Potter, might I have one more word with you, in private?"

Remus and Tonks paused and looked at Ragnot. Harry shrugged, "It's ok Remus, Tonks. I trust him. I'll join you shortly."

The group filed from the room and the door closed again. Harry turned to Ragnot.

Tonks let out with an explosive breath when they exited the bank. "Cor! I never heard of such a thing. Remus, did what I think happen, just happen?"

Harry appeared behind them outside the building.

Remus nodded thoughtfully, watching Harry approach them. "I think so, dear. The goblins just offered their support to Harry. With them controlling the money, they could slow Voldemort's recruitment methods, or at least make it harder to get..."

Harry interrupted him. "It's more than you think Remus. I need to speak to Dumbledore and Minister Bones as soon as possible. Ragnot's offered us a golden egg, but it's not without a price." He turned to his friends "I know we were supposed to have a fun day of shopping, but this is too important to pass up. Why don't you guys go ahead and I'll try to get back here in an hour or two. I'll meet up with you at the ice cream parlor. Remus, would you stay with them please?"

When Remus, a bit bewildered by the sudden turn of events, nodded, Harry turned to Tonks and ginned.

"Come on Auntie. We need to pay a visit to our Minister."

Harry vanished with a soft pop. A second later, a startled Tonks followed him.

The Ministry of Magic...

He appeared in the central apparition point for the Ministry of Magic. Moving over to Security, he had them examine and record his wand before getting his badge.

'HARRY POTTER, SECRET MISSION', he read before rolling his eyes.

"Harry you just can't barge in on the Minister! She's a very busy woman," Tonks exclaimed, hurrying after him.

Harry turned to her, his eyes glowing intensely in his excitement. "She needs to hear this Tonks. Trust me, you'll know all about it in a moment."

Harry walked down the corridor to the Minister's offices. His magic continued to build until he appeared to shimmer. Opening the door, he stepped in the outer office of the Minister, a room full of secretaries and flunkies. He walked over to a desk, where a pretty young witch sat.

In a very soft voice he said, "Would you please tell Minister Bones that Mr. Harry Potter is here to see her and that it's very important?"

The witch didn't even look up. She was busy changing the color of her nails with her wand.

"The Minister is a very important person. You have to make an appointment. And if I had a dime for every time some guy claimed to be Harry Potter..." Her voice trailed off as she finally looked up at him. Harry's eyes glowed with a thousand sparkling green lights. His magic radiated off him in waves and his lightening bolt scar was clearly visible. He smiled at her.

She gave a squeak and rushed from her desk, making her way to the inner office. A moment later, she came back out and, in a loud voice, said, "The Minister will see you now, Mr. Potter."

Every head in the room turned to stare at him.

He glared at her for that and she squeaked again before ushering them into the room. While Tonks took up position just inside the room, the secretary fled.

Amelia Bones sat at her desk waiting for Harry. She was startled by his appearance, "Harry! What a surprise! Please come in. I've been meaning to get out to see you, but this job you forced me into has left me little free time."

Harry grinned and pushed down his magic mentally. In seconds, he was back to his normal self. "I'm sorry about the little show out there Minister, but I thought I might have to do something dramatic to get their attention."

Amelia waved that issue aside. "What brings you here today, Harry?"

"Minister, I've just come from a very interesting meeting between myself and Director Ragnot of Gringots. He has asked me to pass along a message, largely because he feels he can trust me with it."

Amelia Bones was a bit shocked to hear that. The Director of Gringots almost never met with any witch or wizard. He hadn't even met with her, despite her attempts to arrange a meeting!

"The goblins of Gringots have apparently been compiling a list of dark wizards for years, all on their own. Originally, this list was much bigger, but it decreased significantly after the battle at Hogsmeade. Ragnot tells me there are still roughly 130 to 150 English wizards allied to the Dark Lord. He instructs me to tell you that Gringots would be willing to turn this list over to the Ministry, but they ask that when you go to seize assets in Gringots Vaults, they be allowed fifteen percent of the vault value."

Amelia rocked back in her chair as if she had been slapped. The Goblins were coming down off their fence at last? Even Tonks hitched in her breath as she realized the magnitude of what Harry had just said.

Both of the women turned their attention back to Harry.

"This is outside of my realm of understanding, Minister. I think you should probably discuss this issue with Professor Dumbledore in his position as High Magistrate for the Wizengamot."

Amelia nodded thoughtfully at that. "Harry, why did Ragnot approach you?"

Harry looked down at his shoes in embarrassment. Tonks coughed behind him.

Amelia looked at her, "Do you have something to say, Auror Tonks?"

"Yes Ma'am. I think the Goblins approached Harry because of how he's always treated them. He didn't grow up in the Wizarding world and he lacks certain prejudices. As a result, he has always treated the Goblins, and every other magical non-human race that he's met, with respect and trust. Before he was asked to give you this message, he was told that the Goblins would not support Voldemort simply because of how Harry had treated them.

"Regardless of why the Goblins made their offer Minister, and I think we both know who we have to thank for that, the offer is incredible! I think we'd be crazy not to give it serious consideration," the young woman finished.

Amelia turned back to Harry. "Are you the only one Ragnot will deal with, or can we assign another person?" she asked, softly.

"Oh, no. Director Ragnot said he'd understand the need to allow for negotiations. He suggested that Remus Lupin and his wife act as intermediaries between the Ministry and the Goblins. He's aware of the close, personal relationship I have with the both of them."

Amelia and Harry talked for nearly an hour, but the important part had been said and the wheels of change were already rolling in Amelia's head. Harry left, feeling like he had done his part. The business of Government could handle it from there.

The Ministry of Magic, Ministers Office...

Amelia Bones watched Harry's retreating back, shaking her head in wonder. He moves through life sucking us all along in his own personal vortex, she thought.

She pressed a button on her desk. In a moment, a secretary popped her head into the office.

"Ask Arthur Weasley and Director Shacklebolt to join me in my office. And place a call to Albus Dumbledore. I need to see him immediately, as well."

Arthur came in a few minutes later and took a seat. Shacklebolt followed, taking a seat next to the redhead.

"I'm hoping we can track down Dumbledore. This way I only have to go through this once." Amelia said, seeing their puzzled looks.

The floo flared to life a moment later and Dumbledore stepped into the office.

"That was quick! Professor, it's nice of you to join us. Please, have a seat." She said warmly.

"I know you're wondering why I asked you three here today. Well, I just finished a talk with Harry Potter, who had a very interesting message to pass along to me. It seems that the Director of Gringots asked for a meeting with Harry, during which he passed along a very important message for us."

The men looked as startled as she had when she first heard about the meeting. She went on to describe what the Goblins were offering, and what they were asking. The thought of having a list of known dark wizards, and the possible arrests that could follow, was astonishing, but if they could seize bank accounts? The added money would certainly help the war effort, even if they couldn't take the wizard in question into custody!

When she finally finished, she looked expectantly at the three men.

Dumbledore broke the silence. "Under your current charter Minister, you lack the authority to seize vaults. However, should you ask the Wizengamot to approve a state of emergency, covering the present crisis, your expanded powers under the emergency powers act will give you that authority."

The Minister agreed with that assessment. It was something she'd already figured out.

"I'm concerned that we lack the Auror force necessary to sweep up so many people in a single night's worth of raids, Minister. But if we went for some of the bigger fish and just seized the assets of the littler ones?" Shacklebolt suggested.

"The idea does have merit, Amelia," added Dumbledore.

"Hmmm. Yes well, with Azkaban being rebuilt, we wouldn't have enough cells for them all. Tell me Kingsley, do you think we could handle sweeping up twenty or thirty?" the Minister asked.

"Yes I believe so. But Azkaban won't be all that secure a place to keep them, Minister."

"Perhaps, but maybe the goblins are open to more negotiations than just a list of names. Arthur, I'd like to see if we could set up some sort of permanent liaison between the goblins and the government. Perhaps if we're increase the percentage they receive from the seizures, we can buy ourselves a secure guard force for Azkaban."

The three men blinked in surprise, then smiled. A goblin guard force for Azkaban would make the prison far more secure than Dementors ever had. And if Voldemort attacked, it would invoke the wrath of the entire goblin nation!

They were broken from their reverie by the chuckling of the Minister. "It's ironic. Harry Potter walks through life, and everywhere he goes, he invokes sweeping changes. But he isn't even aware he's doing it. I've been trying to meet with the Goblins since I took office. He goes to visit his vault and they ask to meet with him!" she exclaimed, smiling.

"All right, gentlemen," she said, turning serious once more. "We all have things to do. Arthur, meet with Mr. Lupin and let's get this ball rolling. Albus stay a moment so we can talk about that Emergency declaration..."

Meanwhile in Diagon Alley...

Remus sat two tables away from the three teens, giving them some privacy. Ron, Ginny and Hermione were eating ice cream and waiting for Harry to return. He'd said two hours, so they still had time to kill.

Ginny wasn't happy. Harry had run off to the Ministry and suddenly the trip to Diagon Alley wasn't as much fun as it should have been. She felt somewhat on the outside, watching Ron and Hermione.

A small group of students approached the three teens.

"Weasley's," someone sniffed. "I fail to understand why such an upstanding, pure blood family like yours would be willing to have anything to do with half bloods and mudbloods. Ronald, you should know better. Do you want to soil your bloodline?"

Ron whipped his head around and glared at the girl speaking. He couldn't place her at first. Chang something or other, Cho's sister.

Ginny looked furious but Hermione looked hurt. Her muggle born status was often used to insult her.

Ginny stood up and shouted, "Wan Chang, you lumpy Hufflepuff! So you think purebloods are so great? Tell that to Voldemort! He'd love to mark you, I'd bet."

Remus debated whether he should get involved or not.

"Oh yes, we know all about you Ginevra Weasley. Rumor has it you intend to marry a half blood. You're no better than your brother, sullying your family blood line," Wan spat.

There was a very soft pop from behind them.

"I have news for you mudblood and halfblood lovers," Wan continued tauntingly. "Things are going to change this year! Your mudbloods and halfbloods are going to learn their place. BEHIND us purebloods!"

"Wan Chang," came a soft voice behind the group. They whirled to face Harry.

"You might do well to show a little more respect, Wan. For one thing, that's your new Head Girl you are insulting. If that isn't enough, it's my family you're insulting as well. Wasn't Cho sufficient lesson for you?" he asked softly.

"You leave Cho out of this, Potter. She was blinded by lust. This is more important. We're purebloods and will get the respect we deserve from you and your ilk. You half breeds are corrupting and ruining our blood lines..."

"You and your friends have foul mouths Wan, and are in serious need of a washing," Harry interrupted her.

Wan suddenly looked dumbfounded. Her friends mirrored her expression. They looked at each other, wide-eyed, as they each began to foam around the mouth.

"Didn't your parents ever wash your mouth out with soap, Wan? Just what is it with the Chang family anyway? They can't really be as dense as the Malfoy's, can they? If that's the kind of stupidity that comes from inbreeding, I'll pass, thanks," he said, scornfully.

Harry pushed through the group of students as they fled the scene, looking for water. Remus and Tonks moved to join them.

Harry took Ginny's hand in his own, then looked over to Hermione. "You ok?" he asked his chosen sister.

Ron had wrapped his arms around Hermione. She looked up from his shoulder and nodded, saying, "I know I should ignore them Harry, but it still hurts sometimes."

"I know Sis. I still can't get over this whole blood thing. I don't honestly see how they can think blood is so important. Ginny and Ron are purebloods, and very powerful. But you're more powerful than both of them. I'm not a pureblood, and even Dumbledore says I have more power than he does. I mean, even Voldemort isn't a pureblood! Why is blood so important?"

Remus leaned forward. "Harry, it's status. It's a way of saying; I'm better than someone else. I went through something similar for years as a werewolf. I'm a decent wizard, but people looked down on me because I was infected with lycanthropy."

Harry shrugged. "I guess I just don't get it Remus. It all seems so trivial and stupid to me. Ginny doesn't care what kind of blood I have. Ron doesn't care what blood 'Mione has."

"It's not your blood I'm interested in Harry," Ginny added in a wicked tone. Harry smiled at her.

"The purebloods seem to think they are better, it's always been that way," Tonks said. "They place great value in keeping the lines pure. They think they can keep the magic strong that way, Harry."

"But that's stupid!" protested Hermione. "I've read research that clearly says the purebloods are getting weaker, not stronger, by keeping their lines pure!"

"Yes, it certainly seems that way, doesn't it Hermione? You also need to remember that logic has never been one of our strong suites," admitted Remus.

"I guess it was inevitable," Harry said to no one in particular.

"What's inevitable?" Ginny asked curiously.

"We'd manage to get rid of Draco and the Death Eaters and someone steps forward to fill their shoes," he said, watching Wan and her friends round a corner. "So, did you get your shopping done?" he asked, turning back to the group.

Ginny told him that Remus had picked up his stuff, but that they still needed to go to Madam Malkin's for their dress robes. Harry sighed. Clothing shopping. He hated clothing shopping!

The four of them entered the shop with the two adults close behind. Ginny turned to Harry before he went off to look over the robes.

"Harry, try to pick out something other than black this time? You wear too much black as it is."

He grinned at her and told her he wouldn't pick out anything black.

Hermione and Ginny went into the back room to be fitted, while Harry and Ron went off to find their own robes. Harry, following Ginny's advice, quickly picked out two robes which were quickly fitted. Ron was right behind him with his selection.

A short time later, the two men, having paid for their purchases, stood patiently by the door with their bags. Ron told Harry about the new Firebolt 100 on display at Quality Quidditch supplies while they waited on the girls.

Eventually, the girls came out and paid for their purchases. Hermione checked Ron robe to make sure he had picked the right color. Hermione had told Ron exactly what colors he could pick from and his selection met with her approval. Ginny turned to Harry, asking to see his robes.

He had picked out a midnight blue and a deep forest green. Both robes weren't technically black, but they were close. Ginny wanted to say something, but really couldn't. After all, she'd told him not to buy black, and that's exactly what he did. She sighed and shook her head.

Later that night, back in the Burrow...

Hermione, in the room she shared with Ginny, was working her way through the books they had retrieved from the vault. Most seemed like they wouldn't be of much use, but she'd already found one that Harry might be interested in.

She snuck occasional glances at Ginny, who seemed to be taking an extraordinarily long time preparing for bed tonight. Ginny wore her robe, under which was what looked like one of Harry's shirts. She was amused by how the younger girl had managed to slip into Harry's room and stay the night. To be honest, she was also a little jealous.

They had talked about it on the nights she stayed in her own room. Ginny tried to tell her that, as long as they were discrete about it, she and Ron could probably do the same thing. Maybe she couldn't spend the night, but she could have a few hours. Hermione wanted to, desperately, but she was terrified that Mrs. Weasley might catch them and throw her out of the house.

Ginny was sitting in front of her mirror brushing her hair. She then applied some perfume and picked up her wand. Hermione couldn't make out the entire incantation, but she clearly heard her mutter, "Contraho." She was casting the contraception charm!

"Ginny!" she hissed. "Have you been doing what I think you've been doing?"

Ginny looked at Hermione in the mirror and blushed. "No, Hermione. If he'll allow it, tonight will be our first time."

Seeing the other girl's shocked look, Ginny went to her. Taking Hermione's hands in her own, she said, "Mione, I love you like a sister, but you can be so dense. Go to Ron. You want to, you know it, and even I can see it."

"Do you really think I should, Ginny?" she asked in a small voice.

"Do it now 'Mione. How much time do you think we'll have when we get back to school?"

"I'm scared Ginny. What if I do something wrong? What if I do something and Ron laughs at me?"

"He loves you. He's not going to force himself on you. He'll accept whatever you're willing to give and won't push for anything more. And he's not going to laugh at you. I know he's read that book of Harry's, but he won't laugh at you. Come, let's make you pretty and we'll both have an adventure tonight."

She led Hermione over to the table with the mirror and began brushing her hair.

The two talked while they waited for the senior Weasley's to go to bed. When the house fell silent an hour later, the two left their room and crept softly to the boy's rooms. Ginny waited until Hermione had entered Ron's room before she slipped into Harry's.

Harry...

Harry was reading in bed when the door opened, admitting Ginny. He put the book on the night table and watched as she closed the door and cast a silencing charm on the room. His breath caught in his throat as he looked at her. Her hair glowed from its recent brushing and he thought she looked like an angel.

Ginny padded up to the bed, dropped her robe and removed her shirt. She smiled softly at Harry as he reached out with a trembling hand to take hers.

He climbed out of the bed and slid his boxers off, and then he embraced her. She could feel his body tremble against her. Her own body trembled in response. Together they climbed back into the bed and held each other tightly. Harry kissed her, trying in a kiss to convey all his feelings to her. He rolled her so that he was lightly resting his weight on her.

He propped himself up on his arms and she could feel his arousal pressing against her. She strained to move under him, to bring him closer.

"Gin are you sure this is what you want?" he asked softly, stopping her.

"Love, it's what we both want. You and I both know we won't have much time to ourselves once school starts. Let's make the best of what time we have now."

His green eyes glowed a moment longer before he slowly lowered himself back down to her.

Later Harry slept, his arm wrapped possessively around her, his face buried in her hair. Ginny lay drifting. It had been a strange experience for her. The first time it just felt weird, but it felt better the second time. The

third time, she finally understood. She grinned, knowing she'd left scratches on his back. She hadn't meant to, but...

With a sigh, she cuddled close to Harry, stealing his warmth, and drifted off to sleep.

Ron...

Ron was dreaming. He was the keeper for the Chudley Cannons and their most valuable player. He was about to give a speech, thanking them for an award, when he felt a hand cover his mouth. He tried shaking it off, but all that did was wake him up. His eyes widened and, in the darkened room, he could barely make out a form standing above him. The hand was removed from his mouth.

A soft voice said, "Ron?"

He recognized that voice! He broke into a shy smile. "Mione? What's wrong? Why are you here?"

"Move over Ron, I want to be with you for a while."

He quickly moved to one side of the bed and Hermione, after slipping off her robe, slid between the blankets. He rolled to his side to look at her. She took one his hands in her own and pulled him close to her. They kissed in the darkness, and the careful restraint they had tried to maintain since that day at the lake vanished.

The two held onto each other and kissed for a long while before Hermione pulled away enough to ask, "Did you really read that book of Harry's?"

Ron's voice sounded embarrassed and definitely sheepish. "Well, yeah I did, 'Mione..."

"Will you show me a little of what you've learned, Ron? Just a little?"

"Are you sure?"

He could see her nod in the darkness. He quickly cast a silencing charm on the door, and then leaned over to kiss her.

Hermione tensed a little as she felt his hand reach up to softly cradle her breast. He held her like that until she relaxed into his embrace. She tensed again as his hand slid lower and gently touched places no one had ever touched before. But the pleasure was enough to cause her to crush him against her while his fingers danced.

Afterwards, she shyly touched him in return. She was surprised by both his reactions and the strength she felt in her hands. She cried out in surprise when he held her, trembling as she gave him his own release. He pulled her up to him and kissed her hard. It was a kiss unlike any he had given her before. His response made her feel powerful, beautiful and loved.

Ron set his alarm for 4am and they settled down to sleep before she had to return to her room.

Weasley's Wizarding Warbangers...

The building was aflame from top to bottom. The three members of the night staff were dead. Ten Death Eaters stood in a circle outside the building, torturing another member of the staff.

When they were done, they left the lifeless body in front of the burning structure as a warning, cast the Death Mark above the building, and then all ten apparated away.

Welcome to Hogwarts...

Jack Parsons limped up the road from Hogsmeade. For the first time in his life, he set his eyes on Hogwarts. And what he saw did not please him. While Hogwarts was a castle in every sense of the word, the last major renovations had taken place at a time when Castles were no longer built for defense. As a result, the place was wide open.

Jack and Hestia Jones made their way to the main entrance where two figures were waiting for them. Although he would be meeting with Professor Dumbledore later in the day, it had been decided that Professor McGonagall and Professor Serena Snape would meet him first. It was felt that Serena's experience growing up as a muggle born would be of help. Her coming from the Americas might also be of a help in interpreting some of Jack's more eccentric dialogue.

Professor McGonagall stepped forward and offered her hand. "Welcome Professor Parsons. I am Minerva McGonagall, Professor of transfiguration and also the Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts. This is Professor Serena Snape, our potions mistress. You will be working closely with her husband, our Defense against the Dark Arts Professor. In a few moments, we'll show you to your quarters."

McGonagall's immediate impressions of Jack were, to her surprise, quite favorable. Despite his handicap, he was a tall, very fit man with closely cropped hair just now beginning to tinge with gray along the fringes. He had a warm smile and when spoken too, he made and held eye contact. When he wasn't being spoken to, his eyes seemed to roam, cataloging everything around him.

"Pleased to meet ya! I wouldn't mind finding out where I'm bunking and stowing my gear."

McGonagall blinked, but Serena laughed. She turned to Minerva and said, "He means he wouldn't mind seeing his quarters and putting his things away."

Minerva nodded. It was going to be an interesting year.

Chapter 4 - Back to Hogwarts

Somewhere in England, location unknown...

A servant came up to Voldemort and bowed low.

"Well?" asked Voldemort

"My lord, Wormtail has just arrived. He begs an audience with you," said the cowering Death Eater.

"Send him in immediately!" snapped Voldemort.

Pettigrew scurried forward, his silver hand glittering the torchlight.

"Report Wormtail," hissed Voldemort.

"My Lord, I am pleased to inform you we have recruited nearly 900 new servants for your army. I expect we will have more soon."

Wormtail scrapped and groveled in front of Voldemort.

"Yes Wormtail, your dispatches have told me how well you were doing. I am most pleased with you, my servant. I give you a gift."

Voldemort gestured with a hand. Two Death Eaters dragged a young girl, a muggle, no older than fourteen, between them. One Death Eater ripped at her blouse tearing it free from her body. The girl sobbed and tried to cover her nakedness, but could not.

Wormtail bowed low before Voldemort. "My Lord is most generous to his humble servant."

Voldemort looked at his servant with baleful red eyes. "Continue to please me and I will continue to reward you, Wormtail."

The two Death Eaters followed Wormtail from the chamber, the young girl between them. He was already dreaming of what he could do to her before she learned of his knives.

The Burrow, the morning after...

Harry woke up the next morning and slowly disentangling himself from Ginny. He kissed her forehead and headed for his morning shower. When he finished and returned to his room, he found her dressed in her nightshirt and robe.

She smiled warmly at him while he got dressed. When he sat on the bed to put his shoes on, he found himself engulfed in her arms. The two cuddled for a few more minutes before she left for her own room.

Harry went downstairs to the kitchen where Molly was making breakfast. Ron was already at the table, a slightly bemused smile on his face. When the kitchen door opened, the three were surprised to see the twins. They looked depressed and disheveled.

Molly made them sit down at the table.

"Harry mate, it's all gone," said Fred.

"Yeah, burned to the ground, and four of our employees are dead," George added.

"It's burned to the ground? Warbangers? Some kind of accident?" Harry asked in concern.

Fred shook his head sadly, but George answered for him.

"No mate, no accident. Auror's woke us up about 2 hours ago to tell us they found a Dark Mark hovering over the building."

Harry scowled. "All right guys, here's what we're going to do. I'll floo Remus and Dumbledore and ask them to come here for a quick meeting. In the meantime, I need to know if any of the people you lost had families."

Harry went to make his floo calls before returning back to the kitchen.

"Remus and Dumbledore will be here shortly. I want you two to understand. This isn't about the money it's about the people. First, we take care of the families left behind by the attack, and then we find you a secure location where you can work."

Ginny and Hermione came down stairs and entered the kitchen. A few minutes later, Remus and Dumbledore arrived. Harry recapped what had happened to Warbangers and Fred handed Harry a parchment with three names on it.

"Professor, I asked you to come here because I need some advice. Warbangers will play an important role in the coming fight, but they need a secure place where they can work. I'm hoping you can recommend a location," said Harry.

"Hmmm... actually there is an outbuilding on the Hogwarts property we could convert for their use. It wouldn't be as big, but it would be secure and safer for their employees. In fact, Misters Weasley may even find some people interested in part time work for them from the student body. It might, however, drive Mr. Filch crazy, having the Weasley twins back on campus."

Fred and George immediately brightened at this prospect.

Harry handed Remus the slip of parchment. "Remus, use money from my account to replace the twin's losses. And take a further 20,000 galleons out for each of the families on that list."

Seeing the startled looks, he felt the need to explain. "I refuse to see another family hurt by Voldemort. I may not be able to bring their loved ones back, but I'll damned if I'll let anyone starve because of it!"

Remus put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "I understand, Cub. But we're going to be partners in this. We'll help them together."

Harry nodded his head in agreement, before adding, "Maybe we should talk about a War Victim Relief fund?"

"I'll look into it, Harry. I'll owl you with what ever I find out," Remus replied.

Dumbledore and the twins left to look over the Hogwarts outbuilding. Remus stayed for a few more minutes to discuss setting up a relief fund.

"Harry, that was a very good thing you did." Hermione said, as Remus left.

Harry looked at her. She looked...different this morning...more...more what? He glanced at Ron and found him blushing for no apparent reason. Maybe Ginny wasn't the only one sneaking around last night, he thought. NO, NO, NO. I do not want to know this!

"Mione, it's something I have to do. I can't stop Voldemort today, but I won't stand by and do nothing for these people," he said, quietly.

Everyone looked at him. It wasn't so much what he was saying, as what he wasn't saying that they heard. He simply wasn't going to allow the possibility of another family or child put into an abusive situation like he'd been left in. Harry learned one lesson from the last war with Voldemort. War is hell on the fighters, but it's even worse on those left behind.

Ginny held his hand tightly while he wrestled with memories from his past.

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...

The teachers were sitting around the breakfast table. Dumbledore had been called away, but was expected momentarily. Jack Parsons limped into the room to join them. He hadn't had the chance to meet all of the teachers as yet.

The teachers, for the most part, were understandably curious about this strange man. He wasn't a wizard, he had no magic at all. But even with the limp, he walked with an air of confidence and power about him.

Jack walked up to the table, his metal cane making a clicking noise with every step he made. He looked at the teachers and grinned. "Howdy folks, sorry I'm late. This place is bigger on the inside than it looks on the outside."

Professor McGonagall spoke. "No need to apologize Professor. Let me introduce you to your fellow teachers. You've already met Mrs. Snape. To her right is her husband, Severus Snape."

Jack reached out and shook Severus' hand. Severus carefully pulled his hand back and wondered if he should see Madam Pomfrey about a possible broken bone in his hand.

McGonagall proceeded to introduce the others, letting Jack know their names and their teaching field. Professor Flitwick and Madam Pomfrey seemed most interested in his injured leg. The rest seemed unsure, as if they didn't know how to talk to a man who lacked any magical ability.

"Tell me, Professor Parsons. Why didn't your healers fix your leg? And does it cause you much pain?" asked Madam Pomfrey.

"Well Ma'am, our medics are trained in preserving the life of someone, even if it means sacrificing the limb. I was more interested in staying alive at the time, than I was the loss of a leg. I can still get around without too much difficulty, but I will admit it hurts some, especially in your wet climate."

"How did it happen Professor?" asked Professor Flitwick.

Jack eyed the minuscule professor and decided he truly wanted to know. Most people didn't want the whole story. Most people would have shied away from it.

"Back in the first gulf war, I was leading a Recon group of marines into an Iraqi CP when we discovered we were in a mine field. We turned around and tried to make our way out. Most of us had managed to make our way back out when the man bringing up the rear detonated a mine. He was in bad shape, so I went back in for him. I was carrying him out when I stepped on a type 72 mine. After that, I was sent back to the states, spent about seven months in the fix-it up shop, and discharged with a pat on the back."

While everyone seemed a bit shocked by his story, he pressed his point home. "War, be it wizard or muggle, is a hideous thing. Everyone who trains to fight in one, hopes they'll never be called to fight. Take Harry, as an example. He'd like nothing more than to be a normal teenager, with normal teenage problems. He looks at what he has to do, and it scares him silly. But he does it anyway."

Poppy added, "He certainly seems to have more than his fair share of problems. And I have to tend to him far too often, if you ask me. Merlin knows I like the lad, but I don't think he knows how to be normal. It's something he was never taught."

"It's not that Harry goes looking for trouble, Madam Pomfrey," Jack said. "He's the flame and the moths are drawn to that."

"That's an interesting way of putting it, Professor, Harry is a child of the light, just like your flame. He's unable to use most dark art spells at all. And those few he can use cause him intense pain," Severus said, quietly.

Jack eyed Severus Snape for a moment. "Professor, since you and I'll be working together in helping Harry train up the forces needed, perhaps you can help me survey the school and the grounds? If we're going to be defending this place, I'd like to get a better idea of what sort of layout we have to work with."

Severus nodded his acceptance to the request.

"Professor Parsons, if you'll come see me later, I have a salve you can use on your leg. It should help with the pain," Madam Pomfrey said.

Back in the Burrow...

Harry sat on the bed in his room, reading. The book was one that Hermione had given him from the Black Family heirloom vault. He frowned over the passage he was reading, and then sat up quickly and read it once again.

In times long past, people, upset when a loved one died, often used an essence stone, sometimes referred to as a 'Spiritus Crystalus'. These crystals captured the essence of the dying individual. Few examples of these stones are known to exist today, as they were very fragile.

An Essence Stone? he thought. Ok, that makes sense. And it ties in with the observations I made concerning both the crystal's structure and its composition. But how does it help me kill Voldemort? This doesn't sound like an answer to me, or if it is, it's only part of the answer.

Harry jotted down some notes in his notebook, then flipped it to the page where he'd written down everything he knew concerning the crystal. He looked over his notes about its structure and makeup. Most of the elements needed would result in a weak physical structure, but was it right? Just how fragile is fragile? Fragile as glass? Fragile as thin ice? More questions! Unfortunately, this was a puzzle that would have to wait. He had to go to Hogwarts today to see a few people.

Knockturn Alley...

James Clearwater was a minor Order member. His job was a simple one. Observe and report. What bothered him was that recently they'd changed his job slightly. James was now equipped with one of Harry's dark mark detectors and another crystal, which, they said, he could cast directly on and the spell would be received by the mark.

To be honest, he didn't understand most of what they'd told him. He just knew that he was supposed to watch the detector and cast a special charm on the crystal when the detector went off.

Today, he was delivering supplies from his employer to an apothecary in Knockturn Alley, when his Dark Detector started to blink. He quickly put down the box of gnarled toad fingers he'd been carrying, and pulled out his wand and the other crystal. He quickly cast the spell and pocketed both items again. He peered around anxiously, but no one seemed to be interested in his activity. Picking up the box, he went about his business.

Hogwarts, Headmaster's Office...

Dumbledore sat in his office talking with Jack and Severus. Both had managed to come up with a class schedule that evenly split the workload between magic and physical training.

Severus had a problem with his portion of the workload, however. He still hadn't received his list of spells from Harry. Harry was due to arrive today but, until he got to work on that spell list, he'd be hard pressed to commit to more than generalities.

The three men continued their conversation until Fawkes broke into song. A moment later Wings appeared. Wings greeted Fawkes before transforming into Harry.

Harry handed Severus a scroll. "Your spell list, Professor."

Severus quickly scanned the list noting the medical, diversionary, offensive and shielding spells. It was a very comprehensive list.

"Hiya kid! Love the entrance!" Jack said.

Harry grinned at Jack and pulled up a seat for himself.

"Harry," Dumbledore began, "Professor Snape and Professor Parsons will be handling some of the work load, but I'm afraid that you and your original companions will be filling in on a lot of it."

"Yes Sir. That's actually what I expected we'd have to do. I really have several options in regard to training them, but we have a slightly simpler mission this time. And if the Weasley twins come through, we'll have some additional squad classifications this year. I'd also like Ron Weasley and Blaise Zabini to work closely with Jack this year in developing a solid defensive plan. Ron is a pretty good strategist, and I put Blaise in charge of castle security. The two ideas are going to tie together this semester."

Jack was listening to this and nodding approvingly.

"Harry, some of these spells are quite advanced. You don't honestly expect a fourth year to learn them all do you?" asked Severus.

"No, Professor. The way I see it, the fourth years should learn the medical and shielding spells. The DA will teach the spell sets we've outlined to fifth years and above. You'll also note that Hermione has put together a small group of spells that will overload our shields, just in case the other side gets their hands on them."

"I honestly don't see any value in keeping the third years and below around. Perhaps we could find some mature third years to oversee a portkey evacuation? It's a thought."

"Jack um... I mean Professor Parsons, have you had a chance to check out the castle as yet?"

Dumbledore broke in. "Actually, Professor Parsons has been taken on a preliminary tour with Professor Snape. He was about to give his opinion of the castle's defensive status."

When the three men turned to Jack expectantly, he cleared his throat and began. "Historically speaking, castles were originally built as fortresses, with a layered outer defense consisting of walls, moats, cul de sacs. Now, as near I can figure, someone in the last 200 years decided that Hogwarts didn't need those things and had them removed. What we're left with is a couple of well-built, very sturdy buildings, totally lacking in outer defensive works. Also, it appears that the battlements atop the towers and the main structure were removed."

"Now, I'm really hoping you magic guys can come up suitable outer walls, or we're facing a 360 degree axis of attack. We need to channel and limit the areas of access, so the opposing forces are channeled into pre-selected kill zones."

"So what you're saying is we either make our own walls or we're in trouble?" asked Harry.

"Basically Harry, that's the problem in a nutshell," Jack replied.

"Ok I'll speak to the Weasley brothers. They may be able to come up with some sort of temporary wall we can use. If nothing else, I suppose we could surround the castle with portable swamps," Harry said.

"Ok, next order of business," Harry continued, turning to Dumbledore. "Sir, I have a request. As you know, in the last vision I was shown a crystal. Well, I've found a name for it. It's called a Spiritus Crystalus, also known as an Essence Stone. Every reference I've found refers to the crystal being involved in primitive death rites some how. I know it's not a weapon, but it's important." He paused long enough to give Dumbledore a copy of his notes on the subject, before asking, "With your influence in the Government, could you find out if the Unspeakables know about it?"

"I'll see what I can come up with Harry. Minister Bones seems to think she owes you a favor after your breakthrough talk with Director Ragnot, so we may be able to break some information loose on the topic for you," Dumbledore replied.

Harry smiled with gratitude. The crystal had been driving him nuts!

"One final thing Sir. I know you wanted me to arrive early and stay here, but I don't think that's a good idea. There isn't much I can do until the other students arrive and, to be frank, I'm worried about the Express."

"I, too, am worried about the Express. We've heard consistent rumors about Voldemort trying something in September or October. The Express would make an ideal target," mused Dumbledore. "Perhaps you should be on board with your fellow students at that."

"My thoughts exactly, Sir," replied Harry. "If there's nothing else to cover then, I'll get going. Remus said he had something he wanted to show me over at Grimmauld Place."

Dumbledore looked at the other two men and, seeing their nods, turned back to Harry. "No, I think that's it for now. If we find we need you, we'll floo Grimmauld or the Burrow."

Harry nodded, stood and transformed into Wings. He flew around the office once, calling to Fawkes, before vanishing in a burst of flame.

"Ya gotta admit, that kid makes an exit in style!" quipped Jack.

The other two Professors sent each other pained looks.

Grimmauld Place...

Harry appeared in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place. Remus was sitting at the table and Tonks was pouring herself a cup of tea, which she quickly dropped in surprise when he appeared. He returned to human form and grinned at her.

"Most people prefer their tea in a cup, Auntie, not on the floor," he smirked.

Remus snickered at his wife. He had quickly gotten used to her ways. A few, like Remus, suspected that she really wasn't as clumsy as she pretended to be. She certainly showed no signs of being clumsy in the bedroom!

"Harry," began Remus, "Dumbledore has turned the Order into your eyes and ears. Thanks to a comment from Hermione, we've managed to put together some interesting things that I'd like to show you."

Remus led Harry from the kitchen into the large meeting room the Order used. Along one side of the wall was a huge piece of parchment with the map of England on it. There were a few other people in the room, sitting at a large central table loaded with books and parchments. They looked up as the two men entered and nodded, before going back to their work.

"Actually, Hermione was looking into those transmitter crystals you made last semester. She thought that they might be useful in applying tracking charms to any Death Eaters we spot. It was a good idea, but it didn't go far enough. I took what I learned in making the Marauders map and applied it to making this map. Once the charm is applied, it appears on the big map. Then we select one of a series of smaller maps which contain the region."

Harry looked intently at the map. There were several little moving flags on the map and each contained the name of someone, presumably a Death Eater. He glanced at Remus with an eyebrow raised in question.

"Yeah, we've only managed to tag a few so far. We've been hoping to find out where they're setting up, but it seems like they're spread out all over the place..."

Ask Remus spoke there was a soft chiming sound and three new flags appeared.

"Hmmm... that's near Diagon Alley. Let me pull up the map from that area," Remus said as he shuffled through the maps.

Harry moved to stand next to him. Remus quickly pulled out the appropriate chart. Scanning it, he hissed suddenly and glared at the new map. One of the moving flags was clearly named Peter Pettigrew.

Remus made a low sound in his throat and the hair on the back of Harry's neck stood up. Remus might be cured of lycanthropy, but he still retained some decidedly wolfish characteristics.

"I'll be back," Remus snarled. As he turned towards the door, Harry grabbed him by the shoulders.

"Remus NO!" he said. "You can't go after him. He's the only high level link to Voldemort we have tagged!"

Remus shook Harry off him. "Don't you see? He killed James and Lily! He nearly killed you, Harry! I have to go after him!"

"You can't Remus! YOU CAN'T KILL HIM!"

Harry was now in front of Remus, blocking him from leaving the room. The few Order members in the room had stopped to watch. Tonks, hearing the shouting, had come running in and was standing by the door. She watched fearfully as Remus and Harry stared each other down.

"GET OUT OF MY WAY HARRY!" shouted Remus.

"No Remus, I'm not letting you do this," Harry said in a quiet voice. "I want him dead as much as you do, but I'm not letting you do this, not now. We need to be able to track him."

With a snarl, Remus lunged at the young man and punched him in the face. Harry's head whipped back and he staggered from the impact, but remained upright. Tonks gasped and moved towards her husband. Seeing the rage in his eyes, she stopped a few feet from him.

Feeling the swelling begin along his cheekbone, Harry turned to face Remus once more. Looking into his friend's eyes with a mixture of sadness and understanding, he said quietly, "I'm not letting you do this Remus. I'm not going to lose you too. Hit me if you must, but you're not going out to kill Wormtail."

Remus stared at him, breathing heavily. His eyes flickered to the bruise forming on Harry's cheek and his rage dissolved. He had hit Harry! The son of his best friends!

With a howl of anguish, he fell to his knees, crying. In a second, both Harry and Tonks were holding him. Between the two they moved him into the living room and put him on the couch. Tonks rushed from the room. She returned a moment later with a salve for Harry's bruise and a good stiff drink for Remus. Handing the drink to her husband, she turned to Harry to apply the salve.

"H-Harry I'm so sorry. I wasn't thinking. Oh Merlin, what have I done?"

"It's all right, Remus. You want to avenge my parents. I want to avenge them too. I promise you, the day is coming when we will. It just can't be today."

Remus looked over at the man the boy had become. He could see Lily in those fiery green eyes, and James, and so much more.

Tonks put the salve aside, the bruise already fading and sat next to Remus. Her hand gently caressing the back of his neck in a gesture meant to calm and comfort. The emotional roller coaster of the last few minutes had left Remus tired and trembling slightly.

"I think someone needs to lay down for a while," Tonks said softly. Remus nodded tiredly. As the three stood, Remus engulfed Harry in a hug, trying to convey his regret, and his love in a simple gesture.

"It'll be ok Remus. There will come a day when we'll both get what we want," Harry told him.

He watched Tonks help Remus up the stairs and out of sight before he turned into Wings and flame traveled back to the Burrow. He circled his home a couple of times before he landed and transformed back to his human form.

Later in the Hogwarts Teachers Lounge...

During the summer, the staff room was a quiet place. Most teachers wouldn't step foot in the room until term started. However, the past few days told a different tale.

Individual desks were littered with books, parchment, bottles of ink and even a few of Harry's detection crystals. The house elves had been told that, under no circumstances were they to clean anything in the room. As a result, cold teapots, broken cups and stale food could be found on every surface, from bookshelves to desks, even the floor.

The normally quiet room was filled with murmurs, mutterings and scattered curses as the professors worked on their collective project. None were too happy with Dumbledore at the moment. He'd assigned the project, and then made himself scarce. While most realized that the Headmaster had much to do, that didn't mean they had to enjoy it!

Serena Snape pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to stave off a headache. She'd been hunched over her desk in this crowded, rather odorous room for hours. The heat was becoming a problem. While the room was large, it wasn't meant to hold this many bodies for this long without being cleaned.

"This is ridiculous!" Rolanda Hooch exclaimed in frustration. "Three different books give me three different, conflicting answers to the same bloody question!"

At her outburst, eight heads turned and glared at her.

"What?" she asked. "You know I'm right! None of us has had any luck with this damn project Albus has set us. Has anyone here had a full night's sleep in the last few weeks?"

When the Charms professor snorted, heads turned his way.

"Oh, I've slept. But I keep dreaming that I'm swimming through books and parchments, chasing after floating feather quills!"

"At least you've slept," Pomona Sprout muttered, as heads whipped her way. "My eyes feel like they're full of sand! My greenhouses are overrun with daisy's, the dragon manure is drying out, and I still have marigold bulbs to harvest before term starts!"

Serena watched her colleagues with amusement. As heads turned towards each speaker, Serena stifled a wholly inappropriate giggle. It was like watching a strange tennis match, with the spectator's heads following the conversation, rather than the fuzzy, yellow-green ball hit with rackets.

"Minerva, perhaps you should talk to the Headmaster," Sinistra suggested.

"If you can find him," muttered Severus.

"And say what, Cassie?" McGonagall asked with some asperity, ignoring Snape's remark. "You know as well as I that we must find the answer to this!"

"Perhaps we already have," Serena commented quietly, and blinked as heads spun in her direction. "Think about it. The first and simplest answer may be the correct one. After weeks of research, we've found nothing else that fits."

"I will not lose my house!" Pomona said fiercely.

"Nor I!" Filius exclaimed.

Severus and Minerva glared at Serena, making it obvious that they agreed with the other Heads of House.

"And if you have no choice?" Serena asked softly.

That was a mistake. As the room erupted in loudly voiced arguments, she leaned back in her chair and massaged her temples. The lurking headache had become reality now.

The whole thing was ludicrous, in her opinion. Over the last year, Serena had broken up many fights and duels between students, all due to house rivalries. And the Heads of those houses did nothing to help matters! They held on so ferociously to their pride of house that it was no wonder it spilled over to the students. And the teachers had the audacity to be shocked by the behavior of their charges!

"Enough!" Hooch shouted. "I'll do no more research on this. I teach flying, not bookwork," she exclaimed before sweeping the contents of the desktop to the floor with a swing of one arm.

"Rolanda!" McGonagall sputtered into the shocked silence.

"I said I've had enough, Minerva," the fierce eyed woman said, staring down the Deputy Headmistress. "Accio Broom!"

"We need to work together on this," McGonagall began.

"Be my guest. Work away. I, however, am finished!" Hooch said, catching her broom as it sailed into the room. "I happen to agree with Serena. We have our answer already. No amount of research is going to change it. You may not like the idea, but I'd suggest you get used to it!"

With that, she climbed aboard her broom and flew from the room.

When no one spoke, Serena stood. Stretching, she glanced around the room and grimaced at the glares aimed at her. As she walked around her desk, Minerva raised one eyebrow, as if to ask what she thought she was doing.

"You know my thoughts on this, Minerva. If you or Albus don't like the answer, that's your problem. Research if you wish, but I'm with Rolanda. I have a splitting headache and I'm through looking things up. Enjoy your day."

As she walked out, McGonagall turned to Severus. "Can't you do something about her?" she asked in frustration.

Severus snorted. "You're overestimating my abilities, Minerva. Besides, I have to live with her, if you'll remember."

With that, he stuck his long, pointed nose back into the book he'd been reading. He was of the same mind as Rolanda and Serena. He didn't think they'd find the answer they were looking for. If Serena was right, he was going to lose his house.

Back at the Burrow...

Ginny was a little upset. Harry hadn't said much at all to her today. First he'd had that meeting with the twins, and then rushed off to Hogwarts. Once he'd come back, he'd sat out by the tree near the swimming hole, drawing in that sketchpad of his.

Why is he being so moody today? She thought. Does he regret what we did last night?

That thought was at the core of her disquiet. She left the house and walked over to him, stopping a few feet away.

"Harry?" she said quietly.

He placed his sketchpad to one side and straightened out his legs. Without even resorting to a hand wave, he levitated her over to his lap and wrapped both arms around her. He held her tightly, laying his head on her shoulder.

"I've had to deal with so many things today, when all I wanted was to be with you," he said huskily.

"Then you don't regret what we did?" she asked softly.

"Regret? Oh Merlin no, Gin! What you gave me last night... words can't describe it. It's taking every bit of willpower I have right now not to drag you back up to my room," he whispered in her ear. She shivered and moaned as he started to kiss her ear and down her neck.

"Gods how I wish this were over and we could get married!" he said.

"Me too, love," she said, softly running her hands through his hair.

She looked down at the sketchbook and, startled, reached for it. Harry had drawn a house. It was larger than the Burrow, the lines were elegant, not a mansion, but clearly a very affluent house. There was a covered outer deck, which ran the length of the house. She stood on that deck, an infant in her arms. Nearby were three other small children, playing with a big dog in the yard.

"Harry? Is this what you see for us?" she asked in a shy voice.

Harry glanced at the sketch, a little embarrassed. "It just seems right to me Gin. I've drawn you in front of the other homes I've drawn, but they didn't seem right. This one does."

"And the children Harry? Do they seem right to you?"

He nodded his head. She carefully placed the notebook on the ground again and kissed him gently. "It seems right to me too, Harry," she whispered, holding him close.

"Ginny?" he asked suddenly feeling very shy with her again.

"Hmm?"

"W-W-Would you come to my room tonight?"

She kissed his forehead gently. "I'd like that, Harry."

Hermione watched the couple from her position on the platform in the swimming hole. Ron was lying beside her, half dozing and lazily rubbing her back with one hand. Her relationship with Ron had altered again last night, and she was mentally kicking herself for not going to Ron earlier.

Now she sat watching Ginny on Harry's lap. Harry seemed so happy, so in love. Suddenly it hit her.

"Ronald," she said, "Ronald wake up, I need to talk to you."

"Wha... who... 'Mione? What's wrong?"

"Ron, I'm worried about your sister."

"My sister? Ginny? What's wrong with her? Has Harry hurt her? I'll KILL HIM!"

She grabbed him before he could leap off the platform and pushed him down. She straddled him, leaning her hands on his shoulders to hold him down.

"You can be so dense Ronald! Harry wouldn't hurt Ginny. He loves her!"

"Then what are you talking about?"

She poked him in the forehead. "Think Ron. What would happen to Harry if something happened to Ginny?"

"He'd be upset, of course..."

"Ronald, I love you my dear sweet man, but you still don't get it. Harry wouldn't be upset, he'd be devastated. If anything happens to Ginny, he'd probably give up fighting. If he ever lost Ginny, I think he'd lose his will to live."

When Ron still looked puzzled, she rolled her eyes and said, "Don't you see it Ron? We need Harry and Harry needs Ginny. We have to make sure nothing bad happens to her!"

Ron's brow furrowed in concentration before the connections were made. "But what do you suggest we do 'Mione? Ginny's not going to appreciate our hovering over her."

"Leave that to me, Ron."

She leaned back, oblivious to the fact that she was straddling Ron, with no idea what her bathing suit did to his peace of mind. So oblivious was she that she let out a startled yelp when he grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her down to kiss her. She fought that kiss for about three seconds before giving in. She could feel his excitement and it fueled her own. She firmly resolved to visit him again tonight. Maybe they'd even read that book of his together.

Hogwarts, private quarters...

Jack Parsons was in his quarters going over his notes and considering how he was going to turn a bunch of kids into fighters. He sat in one chair with his leg up on another. It had been bothering him all day. In fact, it had started bothering him consistently ever since he arrived. But in the last three days it had gotten worse.

Damn English weather! It doesn't help that this castle has ghosts, cold spots and places that are strangely humid. And who the hell has been coming in cleaning up this place every night? I never expected maid service in a school, let alone invisible maids, he thought.

There was a loud pop behind him. He started and turned to face a strangest creature. It was about four feet tall, and had tennis ball sized eyes.

"What in the Sam Hill are you?"

"I is Dobby, a house elf, Professor. I been cleaning your rooms for you. I heard you was a friend of the great Harry Potter, so I asked to be the one to clean your rooms!"

Jack leaned back with a smile. "So you know Harry also?"

"OH! HARRY POTTER IS A GREAT WIZARD! SO KIND! HE IS DOBBY'S FRIEND!" Dobby nearly danced with glee over being allowed to talk about his favorite subject.

Jack chuckled with amusement. Leave it to Harry to have his own fan club among the elves of the Wizarding world! He thought to himself.

"Well, I don't know how great a wizard he is Dobby, but I think he's a good kid," Jack replied.

Jack stood and swayed as his leg flared with pain. He gripped the back of the chair for support.

Dobby grabbed him by the arm and helped him back into the chair.

"Professor, you is hurting! Dobby get Madam Pomfrey for you." Dobby vanished with a loud pop.

A few moments later Madam Pomfrey walked in through door. Jack was sitting on the chair with his leg propped up, rubbing at a spot below the knee. He looked up as she entered.

"I'm sorry you came for nothing Madam Pomfrey, that little elf..."

"Nonsense," she said, cutting him off, "Dobby may be a lot of things, but he's smart enough to see when someone is in pain. Now, let me see this leg of yours."

Jack grimaced. He knew this type of woman. The nurses at the hospital were like this, bossy and refusing to take no for an answer. Sighing in surrender, he pulled up his trouser leg, revealing the shiny steel and aluminum prosthetic leg.

Poppy pulled out her wand and cast a local pain relief charm while she examined his leg. Jack breathed a sigh of relief when the charm took hold.

"Professor, will you put your other leg up on the chair also please," asked Poppy. Once he'd done so, she frowned. Even muggle doctors aren't that bad! She mused.

"I don't really understand this Professor. Maybe I had best get Professor Dumbledore."

"No need Poppy, I am here. Dobby was kind enough to inform me of Professor Parson's trouble," said Dumbledore, entering the apartment.

"Professor Dumbledore! Just the person I wanted to see. I have something of a mystery here."

Jack looked bewildered. His leg wasn't hurting anymore. As far as he was concerned, the problem was solved.

"Professor, if you look at his two legs, the false leg is now nearly an inch longer than his real one. It's impossible, but if I didn't know better, I'd say his leg is regenerating!"

Dumbledore nodded with a twinkle in his eye. "I had hoped this might happen, Poppy."

"Wait a sec! You telling me I'm growing a new leg? I'll have both my legs again?"

Madam Pomfrey was flustered. This was beyond her experience. A limb that has been removed and healed could not be re-grown!

"Professor you are a squib. That means you may not have enough magic to cast spells, but you still have enough magic to be effected by magic. Hogwarts is one of the most magical places on the planet. When you first arrived, I suspected that Hogwarts itself might take an active role in regard to you. Madam Pomfrey is confused because, even with her spells, she cannot re-grow your leg. But what she can do and what Hogwarts can do are two different things. I'm afraid your probably going to have a few painful days ahead of you Professor, but I believe that you'll not need that cane much longer."

Jack looked stunned. His leg would grow back?

Jack looked down at his leg in wonder. "Well I'll be dipped in shi... um.. Pardon me Ma'am." He looked up at Madam Pomfrey apologetically.

Madam Pomfrey looked down at the man sternly, while privately echoing his reaction. "Professor, I think it best if we get you up to the infirmary, at least for the next day or so. I want to measure the rate of growth and see if we can figure out how long it will take. Besides, the pain is something I can help you with. Do you think you can walk it? Or should I get a stretcher?"

"I can walk, Madam Pomfrey."

Madam Pomfrey watched as he got to his feet and swayed a bit before snagging his cane. Stubborn man! She mused. No wonder he and Harry are such close friends. They're cut from the same cloth!

Pomfrey and Dumbledore followed the tall American from his apartment.

Serena has a blast...

Two days later, Serena was walking near the lake, hoping to avoid the staff. The castle had become stifling in the heat, and she refused to step one foot back into the staff room, regardless of Minerva's feelings on the matter. The other teachers, except Rolanda Hooch, weren't much better. The thought of losing the houses had set them all on edge, so Serena made herself scarce during the day.

She'd spent her days since then exploring the surrounding area. While she didn't go too far from the school, she wasn't close enough to be easily called back. Rolling hills hid the bulk of castle, but the towers were still visible.

Watching the giant squid perform lazy back flips in the cool water, she wrinkled her nose as a faint, foul odor wafted by on the playful breeze. Thinking Professor Sprout must have been correct about the dragon dung, she tried to ignore the smell.

What on earth, she thought, as the first explosive sound rolled over her. Whipping out her wand, she scanned the area. Over a hill to her right, she saw a plume of black smoke rising into the air. Squinting at the smoke, she concentrated for a moment and apparated with a soft pop.

Appearing just below the ridgeline of the hill, she walked a few steps and peered down. Below, the ground was a mess. The grass had been ripped apart, leaving large craters of wounded earth in its place.

Spotting two people below her, she watched as they lobbed something away from them and dove down to the ground. The earth erupted, sending dirt and smoke into the air. As the shockwave rolled out, she felt the ground beneath her feet tremble.

Seeing the damage, Serena wasn't willing to take any chances. Crouching down, she took careful aim at the two figures as they stood and stunned them both. As they hit the ground, she froze, looking the area over carefully for other targets.

When nothing moved, she made her way down the hill, quickly and quietly. Running to the prone figures, she removed their wands and bound them. Looking them over closely for the first time, she scowled.

Voldemort must be scrapping the bottom of the barrel for new Death Eaters, she thought.

The two men before her looked young enough to be students. Red hair, pale and on the skinny side, they looked like children.

"Hello my dear," a voice said from behind her.

Spinning around, wand ready, she found herself facing a smiling Dumbledore.

"Albus?" she asked in a shaky voice.

"Of course," the Headmaster replied with some amusement. "You're as fast as your husband, Serena. But could you, perhaps, lower your wand? I promise not to harm you."

Lowering her wand a bit sheepishly, she found herself grinning rather insanely. Holding my wand on the Headmaster? What was I thinking? Wait...

"Professor," Serena started, "I found these two young men. They were blowing up..."

"It's all right, Serena. I knew they were here. It was my fault for not informing the staff."

"You knew...but they...Professor, they were blowing up..." Serena stopped, at a loss for words.

"The ground? Yes, I know. You've caught the Weasley twins, my dear. Fred and George have been invited to Hogwarts. They are housed in one of the unused outbuildings."

Walking over to the stupefied twins, he gazed down at them with affection. "They're quite brilliant, in their own way. They've invented such wonderful pranks."

"Wait! Weasley's, did you say? As in, Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes?"

"The very same. Mr. Potter has asked them to turn their powers of invention towards the war effort. I suspect you've been witness to one of their newer products from the Weasley's Wizarding Warbangers line."

Noting several vials near the supine twins, she picked one up and examined it. Filled with an iridescent yellow liquid, she turned the vial slowly, noting the thickness of the contents. Reaching for the stopper, Albus' quiet voice stopped her.

"Be careful, Serena. As you've seen, the contents are quite explosive."

With wide eyes, she put the vial down gently. When one of the twins started to groan, she stood up.

"Perhaps we should let them go," she said.

"Do you think so?" Dumbledore asked pleasantly.

Releasing the twins, she stepped back as they came around. While the Headmaster explained what happened to the groggy twins, Serena revised her first impression. Yes, they were young, but the keen

intelligence in their rapidly clearing gazes was quite noticeable. These two must have been a handful, she thought.

After the introductions were made, Serena apologized for her actions. The twins waved her off.

"We should have been..." Fred started.

"...more careful." George finished.

Twin speak? She thought, smiling in amusement. Her only experience was with the Patil twins, and they certainly didn't speak like this!

"Wait a tick!" George cried, interrupting her thoughts.

"Snape, did you say?" Fred asked.

When Dumbledore and Serena nodded, both twins looked at her in puzzlement.

"So Snape married? We didn't..." Fred said.

"...know the old boy realized what girls were for." George finished.

Fred turned to his twin and smacked him in the head.

"Oww! What was that for?" George asked.

"Didn't know what girls were for? Are you mad? You're talking to the git's wife, you idiot!"

"Git?" Fred exclaimed before smacking George in the head. "You just called him a git in front of her!"

"Do you know what girls are for?" asked Fred to George.

"Of course, we read it in a book once, didn't we?" replied George.

Serena slapped a hand over her mouth, watching the twin's rage back and forth at each other. When they finally turned to her and stumbled over their apologies, she couldn't help herself. Doubling over, she laughed so hard she had to hold on to Albus' arm to remain upright. Dumbledore's amused chuckle joined her.

The twins gaped at them.

Four hours and a pleasant lunch later, Serena left the twins and their workshop. They'd given her a tour of their shop and showed her some of their inventions. Albus was right. Both young men were brilliant and she very much enjoyed their sense of humor.

After hearing about some of their exploits while at school, she was disappointed that she'd arrived after they'd left. But then, she'd always been a bit different from her fellow teachers when it came to student pranks.

Thinking about pranks, she realized Severus wasn't going to be pleased when he heard the twins were back. While she thought their pranks were amusing, the twins had informed her that her husband had never gotten over the prank they'd pulled on him.

Personally, she didn't see anything wrong in turning Severus' robes pink and his hair blond. As pranks go, it was pretty harmless.

The problem was keeping that image out of her mind when she next saw her husband. Somehow, she didn't think he'd enjoy her giggling at him.

Hogwarts Express...

The last few days of summer wound down for Harry, Ron, Ginny and Hermione. The girls continued their routine of visiting Harry and Ron every night. Hermione, however, returned to her own room before Molly and Arthur awoke.

The day of their return to Hogwarts dawned bright and sunny. Arthur said his goodbyes early. The business with the goblins was turning out rather successful, and he was needed in the office.

Harry and Hermione watched with bemusement as Molly, Ginny and Ron ran around in a state of total panic, looking for last minute items to pack.

As always, with very little time to spare, everyone was packed, trunks shrunk to pocket size, and ready to go. Ron and Harry had sent Hedwig and Pig off to Hogwarts that morning. Hermione cradled Crookshanks in her arms. Harry wished they could apparate directly to the station, but they decided not to. It was next to impossible to hide that sort of thing from the muggles. So instead they apparated to Grimmauld Place and from there, took a muggle taxi to the station.

For once, the Weasley's were early. They'd managed to arrive at platform 9 ¾ with a whole ten minutes to spare!

Molly hugged Hermione tightly to her and whispered in her ear, "I do so hope the floorboards in the boys dorm don't squeak like they do in Ronald's room, Hermione dear. Take care of yourself and my Ronald."

Hermione stepped back, her mouth open, her face flaming. Molly's message was clear. She'd know about their sneaking around and had decided not to stop it! Suddenly Hermione didn't feel as smart as she normally did.

Molly then went to Ron and whatever she said to him caused his face turned a brilliant red as well.

When Molly turned to Harry, he kissed her on the cheek and said softly, "Thank you for being my mum, Molly."

Whatever she had planned to say to Harry went straight out the window. Her eyes filled with tears and she crushed him to her.

Molly reached out with a hand and pulled the startled Ginny into her embrace as well. Choking back tears, she told them to take care of each other. Then, deciding that what was good for the goose was good for the gander, she released the two and pulled Ron and Hermione into a joint hug.

The four boarded the train with a few minutes to spare. It didn't take long to find the compartment with Neville and Luna. Hermione went to the prefect's car, being Head Girl she had to issue assignments to the prefects.

Ginny touched Harry on the cheek, catching his attention. "Harry, what did you say to mum? She acted like she just received a tea invitation from the queen!"

"I thanked her for being my mum, Gin. It seemed right to tell her that," he replied.

Ginny gave a yelp and hugged Harry hard. As the train pulled out from the station, Luna spotted the ring on Ginny's finger. She was carefully examining it while Ginny retold the story of Harry's proposal, when Hermione returned to the compartment.

Luna looked at the ring wistfully and wished them lots of luck.

Lavender stopped in a short time later. She nearly shrieked when she spotted Ginny's ring, and again Ginny retold her tale. That started a steady stream of Gryffindor girls to the compartment. Harry didn't mind her telling the tale, but the looks the girls were giving him were unsettling to say the least. Some of the girls gave him hungry, predatory looks, others smiled approvingly, and still others looked envious. All of them seemed startled by his eyes. In exasperation, he finally started staring out the window to avoid looking at them.

After the tenth retelling, he leaned over and kissed Ginny on the cheek, telling her he was going to go stretch his legs for a few minutes. He got up and walked out of the compartment, intending to walk to the back of the train before returning. He figured that would give the girls enough time to talk.

As he walked through the train, he'd often stop in a compartment to talk to some of his DA members or other friends. Generally speaking, most of the students were genuinely glad to see him. But a few people seemed cold, standoffish.

Two cars from the end of the train, a small girl rammed into him as she ran forward. Bouncing backwards, she fell to the floor in tears.

Seeing her distress, Harry knelt down next to her. "Are you alright?" he asked.

"I n-n-need to find someone. T-T-They are being mean to Eric!" she said. The little girl sounded so lost and alone, it tore at Harry's heart.

"Who is being mean to Eric?" he asked.

"Some big kids. They keep pushing him and calling him names. Something about blood," she replied.

Harry frowned. He stood up and offered his hand to the little girl. "Show me where they are," he said.

Still holding Harry's hand, the little girl dragged Harry into the last car. There was a cluster of students at the back. Harry looked down the little girl and put his fingers to his lips. She nodded fearfully and they both turned to listen.

"Filthy mudblood! You'll do what we tell you to do!" said one voice.

"Look at the mudblood cry!" said another.

Harry scowled. He recognized that voice. He was annoyed. Older students picking on first years who couldn't defend themselves was nothing new. But this was vicious, bigoted bullying, and he wasn't going to stand by and watch it happen. His eyes flared as he stepped up to the group.

"Wan Chang, I warned you once. Apparently washing your mouth out didn't work last time, so let's try it again, maybe a bit longer this time, hmm? And if I find you tormenting another student, I'll see you spend the rest of the year in detention," Harry said forcefully.

When he'd first started to speak, the group of five fifth years had whipped around to face him. Several of them blanched. When he was finished, they all grimaced as the taste of soap filled their mouths. The little girl giggled when they started to foam. With a squeak, Wan and her friends bolted from the car.

With the group gone, Harry could see a small boy slumped in the corner, tears coursing down his cheek. He looked remarkably like the little girl. Both had the same nose, eyes, and the same brown hair.

Harry knelt down next to the boy. The little girl knelt as well and grabbed the small boy in a hug.

"Are you ok?" Harry asked softly.

"We are now," said the little girl. "Thank you. I'm Erika. This is Eric, my brother. We're twins!"

"Hello Eric, Erika. You can call me Harry."

"Are you a wizard? I'm a witch! And so is my brother. Well he's really a wizard, not a witch. At least that's what the letters said we were," Erika offered.

Harry had to smile. Eric seemed almost painfully shy, while Erika was outgoing.

"Yes I'm a wizard, Erika. And I'm sure you'll be a mighty witch and Eric a mighty wizard someday," he replied with a grin. "You two didn't know you were magical? Weren't your parents magical?"

"Oh no, our parents didn't even know magic existed until that funny man came to our house and explained about the school."

Harry thought for a moment, and all the pieces clicked into place. Muggle born twins. One of them must have mentioned their coming from muggle parents. If Wan had more cronies aboard, these two would be targets as soon as he left them.

"Eric, Erika, why don't you come with me and I'll introduce you to some of my friends. They're witches and wizards too, and I'm sure you'll find them very nice."

Eric looked into Harry's eyes and seemed startled by the light dancing there. Finally, he nodded. He took his sister's hand and Erika took Harry's hand. Harry led them back up the train to his compartment, which, thankfully, had emptied of visiting girls.

He stood in the doorway to the compartment; Erika peeked out from behind his leg and Eric hiding behind his sister. Everyone turned to look at Harry, startled by the presence of the two children behind him.

"Guys, I'd like you all to meet Eric and Erika, a powerful witch and wizard. They ran into a spot of trouble with Wan and her cronies."

Hermione looked at the little girl and her brother. She could see the tear stains on their faces. She started to rise to go hunt down Wan, but Harry stopped her. "Don't worry about it 'Mione. Right now they're getting their mouths washed and I threatened them with a year of detention if they did it again."

Hermione realized that Harry's status as a professor allowed him to issue far greater punishments than a prefect or even Head boy or Head girl could ever do. Instead, she turned her attention to the little girl.

"Hello Erika. Would you like to sit with me? My name's Hermione."

Erika nodded and everyone shifted around to make room for the two kids. Eric spotted the chessboard Ron and Neville had been playing a game on and his eyes widened.

"Is that chess?" he asked shyly.

Ron looked at the boy and smiled. "Sure is! This is Wizards chess. Would you like to play?"

Eric looked torn between staying with Erika and playing, but finally he nodded. Ron set up the board and the two started playing.

Harry sat next to Ginny across from Hermione and Erika and addressed the girl. "Erika, in the future, if you have a problem, find a prefect, or find Hermione, she's Head Girl this year. She'll be able to help you. If you can't find a prefect or Hermione, find a teacher. They'll always be able to help you."

"Harry," Ginny said softly, "that includes you. You are a professor this year."

Harry looked stunned, then grinned sheepishly. "I keep forgetting about that," he said.

"Are you really a wizard, Harry?" asked Erika.

"He's a mighty wizard Erika, and he's your friend," Hermione told her.

Harry leaned forward and stretched out one arm. In his hand appeared a ball of fire. He held the fire there for a moment, and then transfigured it into a white rose. He leaned forward and gave the rose to Erika, who smelled the flower and clutched it to her, smiling shyly back at him.

When the lunch cart came along, he bought Eric and Erika their first chocolate frogs. Erika and Hermione talked for a long while about being a witch. Harry just grinned, watching her come out of her shell. She was far more outgoing than her brother. Every so often, Erika would look over at Harry to make sure he was still there.

Ginny whispered in Harry's ear, "Do I have competition for your affections, my love?"

Harry whispered back, "No. I just couldn't leave them alone. The two are muggle born and aren't prepared for what some people were doing."

She smiled and caressed his cheek before whispering back, "You really do have a 'saving people' thing Harry, and it's one of the reasons why I love you."

He was about to reply when Ron made a funny noise. Harry looked over at him and started to laugh loudly. Ron had finally been beaten at chess! By a first year student! Eric sat there, proudly surveying the carnage on the board.

"Ron, you better hope Eric is sorted into Gryffindor so he can teach you how to play right," Harry said with a smirk, before turning to the young boy. "Eric that was excellent! In the seven years I've been playing him, I think the only game I won was when he fell asleep."

Eric smiled shyly at everyone.

Harry looked out the window and noted where they were. He leaned forward to Erika and tapped her on her knee to get her attention.

"Erika, we'll be arriving at the train station in a few minutes. You'll have to go with the other new students, but I'll introduce you to the tallest man you'll ever meet. His name is Hagrid. He is also one of the nicest people you'll ever get to know. He'll take you and the other first year students up to the school. So, once the train stops, stay close to me and I'll introduce you to him, all right?"

Erika nodded at Harry, her eyes wide. Ginny snickered. She suspected that the little girl was developing a crush on Harry already.

A short while later the train pulled into Hogsmeade. Harry walked the twins back to where their trunks were and helped them put on their robes. He then escorted them from the train.

"Firs Years 'over here pleas! Firs years!"

Harry waved to Hagrid and moved in his direction.

"A'right there Harr... er.. Professor Potter, what can I do for you tonight?"

"Professor Hagrid, I'd like you to meet two friends of mine, Erika and Eric. They are first years and I told him about how nice you were to me during my first year."

Hagrid bent over the two twins and smiled. "Any frien of Professor Potter is a frien of mine," he boomed.

Erika giggled and Eric hid behind her, trying not to smile.

Harry turned to the two of them and told them he'd see them at dinner and that Hagrid would make sure they were all right. He then waved to Hagrid and walked to the carriage his friends were holding for him.

"Harry, that was a wonderful thing you did. Those two kids needed a friendly face today," Hermione said.

In the darkening gloom, he turned his gaze on her, his eyes sparkling. "I couldn't leave them alone, 'Mione. Wan and her cronies had Eric pinned at the back of the last car and were calling him horrible names. Besides, I still remember how scary it was being a first year," he replied with a mock shudder.

He turned and looked out the window, thinking about the twins he'd handed over to Hagrid. Sighing, he said, "You know, I think I'm going to have Blaise keep an eye on Wan this year. Ron, it might not be a bad idea for us to institute some sort of security patrol. Get together with Blaise and knock the idea around, ok?"

"I'll get on it, Harry."

"Harry, that's truly weird," quipped Luna. "Your eyes glow in the dark."

Harry looked at Luna, astounded. Weird? From Luna? "Umm... well it's not like I did it on purpose Luna. It just happened one day."

"We could have used you on our hunt for the uni-roo Harry. I'll ask my father if you can come along next year," she said dreamily, turning away to look out her window, a smile on her face.

Harry rolled his eyes while Ginny and Hermione snickered.

The Welcoming Feast...

Hermione sat near the head of the Gryffindor table. As prefect and Head Girl, she had to welcome any students that might be sorted into her house. Ron sat next to her, with Harry and Ginny across from them. Harry scanned the head table and noted that Jack was missing. He seriously considered going up and asking where he was, but was interrupted by the doors of the Great Hall swinging open.

Professor McGonagall escorted the new students into the Great Hall. As always, a hush fell in the room as the students wondered which of these new students would make it into their house.

Erika spotted Harry and waved at him with a big grin. He smiled back at her.

Professor McGonagall placed a stool in the center of the hall in front of the head table and looked sternly at the youngsters before her. "Students, when I call your name, you will come forward and sit on the stool. I will place the hat on your head and you will be sorted into your houses," she said.

When she placed the hat on the stool and stepped back, waiting for it to begin its song, a wave of dizziness hit Harry hard. He could feel his magic swelling inside him, far higher and stronger than ever before. His stomach roiled. He gripped the table edge tightly in his hands to keep erect. His locket suddenly gave a burst of comforting warmth.

Down through a thousand years,
Into groups of four I've broke,

Spawning hatred and fear,
With divisive words I've spoke.

Harry gasped, his body straining with the power that filled him. His friends turned in alarm, looking at him.

The time of sorting is past,
No more of houses will I speak.
Hogwarts, unite and stand fast!
Separate, divided, you are weak!

Harry tried to fight it. He felt like he was going to explode! He looked to his friends, the panic clearly evident in his eyes.

Blade Wielder and serpent's friend,
The stars have writ thy name on high.

You foretell the Dark Lord's end,
The light, though dimmed, it will not die.

Harry began to tremble, his hands starting to glow as the magic surged even higher. Seeing the plea in his eyes, Ginny reached out to touch him, but the magic prevented the contact.

Phoenix singer, Crystal Mage,
Guardian o' the light.

Stand against the coming rage,
Stand NOW and fight!

Harry's magic flared once more and he was enveloped in a glowing nimbus of blue light. The castle began to rumble ominously and the walls of the Great Hall started to shimmer in the same blue radiance.

He staggered to his feet, his eyes blazing with energy. The castle started shaking. The groan of stone against stone as the very core of Hogwarts heaved echoed through the Great Hall. The first year students cried out in fright and many fell to their knees as the castle shook. Professor McGonagall tried to keep her feet under her, as she stared at Harry in disbelief.

He threw his hands outwards and upwards. Bright beams extended from each hand and he lifted off the floor, floating. Fawkes appeared in a bright flash of flame and swooped over to Harry, singing a song of triumph and joy! The walls continued to brighten and the floor shook even harder. The Hall erupted in flame as more Phoenixes appeared. They joined Fawkes as he circled the Great Hall, singing his song.

The noise was tremendous! The wards outside Hogwarts shimmered and glowed with an intense light. In the Great Hall, the walls burned with a bright blue luminescence that was blinding to everyone. The house banners flashed into flames. There was a ringing sound like a colossus was striking a huge bell. The light flared again and everyone covered their eyes.

When the light finally faded, the students looked around in wonder. All of the house banners were gone. In their place was a banner that hadn't been seen in almost a thousand years. It was black in color with a Golden sunburst at its center. Crisscrossing the sunburst were a wand and a sword. But that was only the beginning.

Every student's robe had been changed. The House colors had been replaced with a pure white trim, the House crests replaced with the same black banner.

Ron, Ginny and Hermione scrambled to Harry, who lay crumpled on the floor. One by one, the Phoenixes flew to Harry and vanished in a burst of flame.

As Harry started to come around, Ron pulled him to a seated position. The hall was in an uproar.

Dumbledore amplified his voice before he began to speak. "Quiet! Quiet down please. Everyone take your seats. That's it, everyone take your seats now. Please, give us a few minutes and we'll be able to get the welcoming feast started."

Dumbledore walked over to where Harry lay on the floor. Poppy was already there, checking him over for injuries. Harry was awake, but tired. Both Snapes stood nearby looking concerned.

Dumbledore leaned down and looked into the young man's eyes. "Harry, what did you do?"

"Believe me Professor, if I knew what I did, you'd be the second person to know. The first would be me. I don't know what I did Sir. It... it... was almost like being under an Imperio, but different. It was like I had to do it, like I wanted to do it. I can fight off an Imperio, but I couldn't fight this. Merlin knows I tried," Harry replied tiredly.

"Are you alright Harry? Do you wish to go to the infirmary?" Dumbledore asked.

"No sir. I'm just a little tired and I have a headache. Besides, I think Madam Pomfrey would like to enjoy the feast for once, instead of looking after me."

Madam Pomfrey snorted with amusement.

"Miss Granger, send out the prefects to check out their respective houses. Something has changed. We should find out what," said Dumbledore.

"Professor, what about our robes? The house banners?" she asked.

"Yes, yes. It seems we have many new mysteries to ponder, Miss Granger. Now, if you will please speak to your prefects?" Dumbledore said with a twinkle.

Harry started to struggle to his feet. Ron and Ginny assisted him while Hermione went to round up the prefects. Dumbledore looked at Harry intently.

"Honestly Headmaster, I'm fine, just a little tired. I'll take my seat again."

Dumbledore nodded in agreement and let Harry's friend help him to his seat.

Ginny reached up and touched his cheek. He closed his eyes and leaned into her touch before taking her hand in his own and kissing it, his eye's sparkling at her. He never even noticed the multiple sighs coming from the other girls at the table.

Professor McGonagall fixed the stool and called the attention of the first years. "When I call your name, come up and we'll sort you into your house."

"Assanti, Angelo"

A small dark haired boy stepped forward and sat on the stool. She placed the hat on the boy's head and waited. The hat didn't move or speak. It was totally inert. McGonagall shot Dumbledore a pleading look. Dumbledore pointed to the box in front her on the head table where the names had already been pre-sorted by the House Heads.

McGonagall slumped her shoulders in defeat. Walking over and opening the box, she began reading the names from the lists made by the teachers.

Harry watched this strange sorting with amusement. He had the strangest feeling that the sorting was unnecessary. He was pleased, however, when both Eric and Erika Stonesmith were sorted into Gryffindor. Harry and Ginny waved to the brother and sister to take their seats at the Gryffindor table. Hermione was still by the entrance to the Great Hall, waiting to get reports back from the prefects.

Erika sat near Harry and was staring at him in awe. "Harry, that was way cool! You made the whole place shake!"

Ginny giggled at the young girl's exuberance. Erika looked at her, considering her for a moment. "Are you Harry's girlfriend?" she asked.

Ginny liked this little girl. She was bluntly spoken, curious and not afraid to ask questions. "Yes, I am his fiancée."

Erika thought about that for a moment before replying, "Good, he's way too old for me and I wouldn't want for him to wait around until I grew up. He is cute, though."

Ginny started to laugh, earning a glare from Professor McGonagall who was still calling out names. Harry buried his head in his hands.

The sorting was finally completed just as the prefects reported back to Hermione. With a stunned expression on her face, she went up to speak to the Headmaster. He nodded at her and motioned for her to return to her seat.

Dumbledore stood and all eyes turned to him. "And now, let us enjoy this wonderful feast! Tuck in!" At that, the tables filled with food.

"OH COOL!" Erika exclaimed. Even Eric seemed impressed as a large platter of his favorite food appeared in front of him.

As they ate their meal, Hermione kept shooting suspicious looks at Harry until he couldn't take it any more. Sighing, he put down his knife and fork and stared back at her.

"What, Hermione? You're staring at me."

"You really have no idea what you've done?" she asked.

"Done? 'Mione I couldn't stop myself from doing what ever I was doing. So no, I don't know what I've done. It's left me tired and with a pounding headache," he snapped back at her in annoyance.

Hermione looked hurt. Ginny placed one hand on the back of his neck. He leaned into her soothing touch slightly.

"Look Hermione, I don't know what I did. I don't know why I did it. It happened and no matter how hard I tried to fight it, I couldn't stop it. I'm sorry for snapping at you. But really, my head hurts like a giant's been kicking it around. Just once, I wish these things would happen to someone else. Ron, Dumbledore, anyone! I swear when this is all over, I'm moving someplace where no one's ever heard of Harry Potter or the Bloody-Boy-Who-Lived," he said softly, the apology clearly evident in his tone.

Hermione reached over and grabbed his hand. Her eyes told him she understood. He smiled weakly at her. They were interrupted when Dumbledore stood up and spoke.

"Attention please. Attention."

The hall quieted and all eyes turned to him.

"I was going to have just a few start of term announcements, but it seems circumstances have changed somewhat. So now I have more than usual to say. Please bear with me.

"Tomorrows classes have been canceled. The castle has undergone some major alterations. The staff and I need to survey these changes to make sure everything is safe for the students. Therefore, all students will be confined to the common room, the Great Hall, or outside the castle.

"You'll note I said 'the common room'. It seems that Hogwarts has decided to eliminate the Houses. Prefects have reported to me that no matter what entrance they use to enter their House, they find themselves in one giant common room. The Houses have been merged."

The Headmaster waited for the shouts, groans and angry questions to quite down before continuing.

"For the time being, you will continue to consider your Head of House as your adviser. Teachers, may I remind you that without the Houses, taking house points is now somewhat redundant.

"The banner which you now see hanging in the Great Hall is indeed a symbol of Hogwarts. It has not been seen since the founding of the school. This banner has been referred to over the years as the Hogwarts Battle Banner. The last time it was seen, the four founders rallied the rest of the Wizarding world under it to combat another Dark Lord.

"Finally, on to more mundane announcements. The Dark Forest remains forbidden to all students that do not wish to be eaten," Dumbledore looked pointedly at the Gryffindor table with this statement.

"A new class will be offered this year, called Advanced Defense. It will earn you NEWT credits. There will be three Professors teaching this course. Professor Snape, Professor Parsons who, I regret to say, is currently in the infirmary, and Professor Harry Potter. This will be an expansion of Harry Potter's group from last year. I must warn you, this course will be dangerous and difficult. If you are interested in taking the class, please see one of the Professors involved.

"Finally, the last two items. Our caretaker, Mr. Filch, has informed me that the list of prohibited items has been expanded to include all of the new products from Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes. Anyone wishing to inspect this list of over 2200 items can do so in Mr. Filch's office. Additionally, the owners of Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes have setup an experimental facility on our campus grounds. They have informed me that any students wishing to earn a few extra galleons on the weekends may do so by applying for part time work from them."

When Dumbledore sat down, many of the students turned to look at Harry in disbelief. With a groan, the Embarrassed-Boy-Who-Lived folded his arms on the table and buried his face in them, wishing very much to be the Boy-Who-Disappeared.

Chapter 5 - Heroes and Heartbreaks

Hogwarts Chaos...

Harry and his friends trudged up to the entrance to their common room. Before Harry had left, the Headmaster had given him his schedule for the coming year. It was very busy, almost as bad as the one Dumbledore tried to put him on last year. This year, at least, he had weekends and holidays off. During the week however, there was barely room to breath.

It was with no small feeling of dread that Harry approached the regular entrance to the Gryffindor common room. If the common rooms have merged like Dumbledore had said, then there were probably more surprises waiting inside.

Harry led his friends in through the Gryffindor passage way. At least the password still worked. He stopped just inside the common room, causing Ginny to bump into him, and Ron to bump into her. Stepping aside so the others could get by him, he just stood there gawking at the sight.

What had been the nice cozy common room was now huge! Fireplaces and couches lined the walls. There were a generous supply of comfortable armchairs and tables for doing homework. Entrances to the dorms lined the walls. Next to each entrance was a parchment stating who was in which room.

Around the room several loud arguments were breaking out. People reading the parchments of room assignments were definitely not happy.

Harry started scanning the parchment closest to him. He was surprised to see the names were clearly mixing houses. He saw Slytherins housed with Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors and Ravenclaws. That explained why people were fighting and shouting. He felt a tug on his robe. He looked down to see Erika and Eric.

"Where do we go?" Erika whispered. Eric was clutching her hand, looking around wide-eyed at the students.

Harry could see that the commotion among the other students had frightened not just these first years, but the other first years as well, who were all huddled together for safety. He motioned for Ginny and Hermione.

"Gin, 'Mione, the older years are scaring the daylights out of the first years. Let's snag some DA members and get them sorted out first."

Ginny bent down to Erika saying, "Would you like me to help you find your room?"

Erika glanced at Eric fearfully, but Harry interrupted her train of thought. "Don't worry Erika, I'll help Eric find him room."

Harry took Eric's hand and they went in search of the parchment with his name on it. Harry was relieved after checking a few staircases to find his name, and Eric's name on the same parchment. He took Eric up to his dorm room and showed him where he'd be sleeping. The house elves had already unpacked his stuff for him. The room was empty for a while, and then another boy came in with a hearty greeting.

"Hiya! I'm Angelo, Angelo Assanti! Boy this is so neat!"

Harry could only grin as Eric opened up to the new boy. He told Eric that his room was only a few flights above his, and if he needed anything, to look for him or Hermione. He left, still smiling. Angelo was busy teaching Eric how to play Exploding Snap.

Returning to the common room, he could see most of the first years were gone. DA members, in search of their own dorm rooms, were escorting the few who remained.

What was more disturbing to him was the sound of fighting coming from several areas in the common room and from the dorms. He walked over to one particularly loud argument, taking place in front of one of the staircases. It was a group of fourth year students from mixed houses and they were arguing over the fact that they were all sharing a dorm room.

"What's the problem guys?" he asked.

"THEM!" One of the forth years said, pointing at two of the students. "We don't dorm with Slytherins!"

"Oh really? What says they're Slytherins? No Slytherin colors, no signs saying they're Slytherins. In fact, all I see is two students."

"But...but Harry! They are Slytherins!" Said one of the other students.

"They are students," he snapped back. "And you will treat them with respect until they do something to deserve taking that respect away. Am I clear on this?" Harry's eyes flared threateningly, it was the only sign he was getting annoyed.

"Yes, quite clear Harry!"

The five students scrambled up the stair case.

Harry could hear the sounds of more fighting coming from various staircases. He spotted Hermione running down one staircase only to turn and run up another. Ginny came dashing down the stairs and, spotting Harry, she ran over to him.

"Did you get Erika bedded down ok, Gin?"

She nodded. "I did, but the rest of the dorms are in near riot. The first years are terrified to come out of their rooms."

"This is stupid. I'm going to see Dumbledore. The teachers should be here, not cowering in their rooms. If the fights continue and you don't see me back within an hour, have the DA stun any one still fighting. And if any one starts using magic, take them down fast."

"Harry, are you sure?"

He nodded his head and strode out an exit.

Harry walked the corridors of Hogwarts, heading to the Headmasters office. He wasn't angry, but he was very irritated. The problem with the first years was bad enough. The prefects were simply swamped. And without teacher support, the situation could turn ugly.

He arrived at the entrance to the Headmaster's office. The gargoyle blocked his path. He gave it one glance and the gargoyle sprang to life, raising up the staircase. As he rode the staircase, he could hear the sound of arguing coming from Dumbledore's office.

He didn't bother to knock. He simply collapsed the locking charm on the door and entered.

Inside the room were Professor Flitwick, Professor McGonagall, Professor Snape and his wife, Professor Sprout and Dumbledore, who had a pained expression on his face.

Other than Serena Snape and Dumbledore, no one seemed to notice his entrance.

"I'M NOT GIVING UP MY HOUSE!" McGonagall yelled.

"OH SO IT'S OK FOR ME TO LOSE MY HOUSE BUT NOT YOU MINERVA?" Severus shot back.

Harry looked at the Professors and decided he needed to do something to get their attention. He waited until there was a pause in the shouting and then he said in a very quiet voice, "Well isn't this enlightening? Teachers acting like first years fighting over a sweet."

The scorn in his voice was enough to make them all turn to stare at him.

"While you four are busy acting like eight year olds, and I might add, doing a wonderful job of it, there are at least a dozen fights raging in the dorms. The first years are scared out of their minds. The prefects are swamped trying to calm everyone down and it just isn't working for them. And what do I find when I come here looking for help? The same kind of fighting. Well, I see we students have things under better control than you do, so I'll just go back to the dorms. Our fights will be over in about," Harry checked the wall clock, "30 minutes."

He turned to leave when the Dumbledore spoke, his eyes twinkling. "A moment please, Harry. How is it you know the fighting in the dorms will be over at that precise time?"

"Easy, Sir. I told the DA to start stunning the students who were fighting if no teachers showed up within that time frame."

When everyone looked aghast, he added quietly, "Professors, your duty isn't to some house. It's to your students."

All four Heads of House suddenly looked very sheepish. Almost as one they ran to use Dumbledore's floo to get to the common room.

Dumbledore did something very out of character then. He laughed. Not a chuckle, but a deep, from the gut belly laugh. When he finally calmed down, he waved Harry and Serena to take a seat.

"Oh my. Sometimes laughter is the best magic. I have been sitting here, listening to those four since dinner ended. Did you really instruct the DA to start stunning students Harry?"

"Actually Sir, I told Ginny to start stunning in a hour if no teachers showed up by then. I didn't really want to stun anyone, but this seemed the simplest way of catching the Professor's attention," he replied.

"Well, you got their attention," murmured Serena. "I was starting to consider stunning the four of them myself if it went on much longer."

"Sir, now that I'm here, I think it's a good time to talk about a concern I have."

Dumbledore motioned for him to continue.

"I've been looking over my schedule for the coming year and, quite frankly, there isn't ten minutes free time in it. To be honest, I'm seriously considering dropping my NEWT courses."

Serena hitched in her breath. "But Harry..."

He shrugged. "Professor, if Voldemort wins, then all the work is for nothing. If he loses, I can either repeat the year or hire tutors to get me through the NEWTS. Honestly, I could ignore the NEWTS entirely. Sirius and my parents left me enough money that I could never work a day in my life and still leave money to my great-great grandchildren. I want to take my NEWTS Professor, but I don't have any free time with this schedule. You've even got me helping in the regular DADA classes."

"I have less than eight months before Voldemort and I have to fight. I'd like to be able to spend some of that time with my fiancée Headmaster," he finished quietly.

Serena made a move to speak, but Dumbledore waved her to be silent. "Harry, your charms, transfiguration and DADA Professors tell me you were already performing at levels far in excess of the NEWTS at the end of last year. Might I suggest that, instead of dropping the classes, you take those NEWTS early? That would open considerable time in your schedule. If you, for example, took those exams in two weeks, or even three weeks, you would have them out of the way, leaving you only to worry about Potions and Herbology."

"Yes, that would work Professor. I didn't really want to drop those courses and forgo my NEWTS, but I didn't see any way around them." With that Harry sighed, then stood. "I best get back to the dorms, Sir. Good night Professor, Headmaster."

Harry turned and left the office.

"He still seems to doubt himself Albus. He has more confidence, but there's still some doubt there," Serena said softly.

"I'm afraid you are quite correct Serena. He has a lot more confidence than he used to, but he's also preparing for the possibility that he may lose. Only three days ago, he sent me a copy of his will, and letters to hand out in the eventuality of his death," Dumbledore said gravely, the twinkle gone from his eye.

"Is there nothing we can do Albus?" asked Serena. "It tears at me to see him thinking these next months are all he has left."

"We help him as best we can, Serena. Beyond that, it's all in his hands," replied Dumbledore. "I think I'll call a teachers meeting for tomorrow. We have much to discuss, not the least of which is what Harry did this night."

When Harry returned to the common room, he found order had been restored. Thankfully, it hadn't resulted in any students being stunned. He sat down on one of the couches in front of a fire and closed his eyes briefly. Seconds later, his eyes snapped open as his girlfriend bounced into his lap. With a grunt, he wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her hair. He would have stayed that way all night but Hermione and Ron joined them.

"Harry, I don't know how you got the teachers here, but thank you! I couldn't believe the fighting going on," said Hermione.

"It was simple, Hermione. I told the teachers that, if they didn't show up, the DA would start stunning students in 30 minutes."

"You didn't!"

"Actually, I did. It was the only thing I could think of doing to get the teachers to stop fighting among themselves. Anyway, after the teachers left Dumbledore's office, I told him I was considering dropping all my NEWT courses."

"HARRY!" Ginny and Hermione both exclaimed.

"Oh, it gets worse. We compromised. I'll be taking my NEWT exams in DADA, Charms and Transfiguration in two or three weeks."

Hermione didn't know whether to be shocked or impressed. Taking even some of your NEWTS early? It was almost never done!

"You're taking your NEWT exams early?" Hermione asked with a thoughtful look.

"Uh oh, 'Mione is thinking about talking to the Headmaster," Harry said with a grin. "Oh, have you guys found out who you're sharing a dorm with?"

Ron grinned. "You're not going to believe this Harry! It's like the castle wanted us all together. Most of the DA are sleeping with other DA members. You and I are sharing with Neville, Blaise and one of his Slytherins. Ginny, Luna, Hermione are together with Susan Bones and Hannah Abbot."

Hermione huffed at him. "I am most put out with you Mr. Potter. I am Head Girl. I was supposed to get a private apartment this year. That is, until you rebuilt the castle."

Harry chuckled then said, "Well Hermione I guess we'll all have to go back to sneaking around to each others beds. However, that did occur to me, so I've had Remus make a few purchases for me. Should be here in a day or so. In the meantime, I'm going to hold my fiancée and kiss her good night. I'm tired and it's been a long day. And Ron, if you make gagging sounds, I swear I'll bash you!"

Somewhere in England Location unknown...

The Death Eater ran into the dimly lit chamber and bowed at the feet of Voldemort.

"Report," hissed Voldemort.

"My lord, the Death squads are in place and are awaiting your orders. Each has been told of their targets."

"Very good! Very good! We will begin the attacks soon," Voldemort cackled, his evil laughter filled the room.

Ministry of Magic, Department of Magical Law Enforcement...

Kingsley Shacklebolt paced the receiving room. With just over 65 Aurors now on his ready list, he could ill afford to lose any tonight. He had broken his Aurors into teams of ten, each team had been sent out to capture one known Death Eater. With luck, they would be able to snare twelve tonight, maybe more.

Earlier that day, the Ministry had quietly seized the Gringots vaults of 143 Death Eaters. Now they were going to try to sweep as many up as they could, but they could realistically only do so many in a night. He had carefully picked the names from the list, the wealthiest, and the most influential.

These captures tonight wouldn't be sent to the veil. They would be sent to Azkaban. He grinned. He had been at Azkaban when the new Goblin Guard force had arrived. One hundred Goblins and ten dragons to be exact! Even with Azkaban still under construction, the force was something to be reckoned with. Early on in their negotiations, the Goblins had asked to help re-build the facility. As a result, the three cellblocks above ground would house 100 or so prisoners. The rest of the prison cells would be under ground, built by Goblin tunnelers.

Kingsley stopped pacing when the first group of Aurors apparated in with a manacled man in his pajamas. The prisoner seemed to be in a state of shock. One Auror carried the Death Eater costume and mask. Ministry healers rushed to the Aurors to check for any injuries. Kingsley breathed a prayer of thanks when he saw there were no injuries.

Minister Bones walked in a moment later.

"Well?" she asked Kingsley.

"The first team just returned Minister. One capture, no injuries," he replied.

"Very good. I'll be in my office. Keep me informed, Kingsley."

He nodded and watched her leave the room. At least she isn't breathing down my neck tonight, he thought as another group of Aurors apparated in.

Kingsley turned from his pacing and watched as they processed another prisoner.

Hogwarts Teachers Meeting...

Dumbledore waited until all of the teachers filed into his office before he began to speak.

"Good morning everyone, I trust you slept well?" he asked, eying the four former head of houses.

Surprisingly Professor McGonagall and Professor Severus Snape seemed to have had better nights than their counterparts. Professor Sprout and Professor Flitwick were less than enthusiastic about being there this morning.

"Now, I've called you all here to talk about what has happened to Hogwarts. First off, I do not believe that our Professor Potter did that intentionally last night. You'll note I did not invite him to this meeting. That's not because I mean to slight him. I just thought we'd talk about what has happened here and how it affects Hogwarts."

"Headmaster, have you been outside this morning?" asked Serena.

"Indeed I have. I suppose you are referring to the walls, which now surround the castle? I dare say our Professor Parsons will be most pleased with them, as well as the other alterations."

"Several of Professor Parsons' concerns have been addressed with this change," Severus said. "The classrooms with windows have either been moved to interior locations or the windows greatly reduced in size."

"Yes, it does seem that Hogwarts has reverted to its original design. As Professor Parsons pointed out Severus, castles were originally built as fortresses," replied Dumbledore.

"But how Albus?" breathed McGonagall.

"There is more magic in a single stone of Hogwarts than there is in any of us, Minerva. I suspect those headmasters that considered the sorting hat as the voice of Hogwarts were most likely correct. Did you not listen to its song last night? It clearly commanded Harry to do what needed to be done. I think Harry acted merely as a focus for all that magic last night. He was merely doing what he was told to do."

"I admit that I was concerned at first. But I was greatly comforted when Fawkes appeared. And when the other phoenixes appeared? I cannot recall ever seeing so many phoenixes in one place before. But clearly, what happened last night was powerful light magic, the strongest I have ever seen."

"Teachers, the bickering over houses must end. Harry was right last night when he reminded you that your duty to your students should take precedence over your loyalty to the Houses, which no longer exist. We must focus on the students and their needs. We must work together. As part of that, I am disbanding the House Quidditch teams."

All four former Head of Houses gasped at that.

"Madam Hooch, you will hold tryouts to build four new teams. Each team will be assigned a facility advisor. No team will consist of players all from one of the old houses. If you want, take the four old captains and make them captains of the new teams. Then let them hold the tryouts. Once the teams are formed, they will vote on their names. Matches will be held for the fun of it, not because of some obscure reason to beat another House in a race for the House Cup, which also no longer exists."

"Will we ever have the houses back? No one can say. The sorting hat has warned us for several years now that we must unify. Now, that's been taken out of our hands. We are unified, like it or not, and we will work together." Dumbledore paused to let that sink in.

"Albus, I know we discussed this last night, but I'm still concerned about Harry's confidence issues," said Serena.

"I know Serena, as am I," replied Dumbledore.

Dumbledore went on to explain how Harry had visited him last night and told him of his plans to drop his NEWT courses, and why. He explained that he had convinced Harry to compromise by taking some of his

NEWT exams early. He also told them that Harry wanted the free time in his schedule so he'd be able to concentrate on his task, and be able to spend some of that free time with his fiancée. Most of the teachers were shocked until he explained that Harry still felt like he didn't have a good chance at winning the fight.

Into the silence that followed, Flitwick asked, "What are we going to do, Albus?"

"Harry will be taking his NEWTS in DADA, Transfiguration and Charms, as all three of you expressed the opinion at the end of last year that he was performing far beyond the NEWT levels. I told him we could not possibly schedule them any sooner than three weeks."

They all smiled at that, knowing that they could hold those exams anytime they wanted. All that was needed for these tests was alerting the Ministry that they were taking place.

"What I'd like you teachers to do, especially in DADA, Transfiguration and Charms, is to excuse him from homework until the tests. Allow him to use the class time to study for them, either in the classroom itself or in the library.

"Severus, I know I asked him to assist you in your regular DADA classes but I want him thinking about a future as a teacher. I understand he shows great promise. The problem, as I see it, is to keep him busy in productive pursuits so he doesn't have the time dwell too much on his upcoming fight."

"He's a natural born teacher Albus," Serena said. "I watched him walk young Ronald Weasley through the process of making a promise ring for his girlfriend last year. By the time he was done, Mr. Weasley could have made a fortune in making rings for his friends."

"Quite so Serena. I've seen other examples of what he's done for students. Mr. Longbottom was quite inept, until Harry started helping him. He seems to instill a spirit of wanting to learn in others," replied Dumbledore.

"Very well, Professors. Make sure the prefects know how to find your classrooms if they have been moved," said Dumbledore.

Dismissed, the teachers filed from the room.

Hogwarts Infirmary, first day of real classes...

It was early morning and, having finished his run, Harry decided to look in on Jack before he went to breakfast. He didn't know why his friend was in the infirmary, but considering Hogwarts, and Jack's inexperience with magic, anything was possible.

Cautiously opening the infirmary doors, he peeked in.

"Harry! Over here kid!" shouted Jack from a bed.

Harry grinned at him and walked over. "Jack, what kind of trouble did you get into? You were fine the other day!" he said.

"Trouble? I didn't get into trouble, Harry. Seems this old castle of yours decided it didn't like me having only one leg."

Harry's eyes widened and he sat down on the chair next to Jack. "You're growing a new leg?"

Jack looked very pleased. "Yup! Oh, it's pretty painful, but Madam Pomfrey has me pumped up on Happy Juice, so I don't notice it much. I'm working on the foot right now, so I should be out of this body and fender joint in another day or two."

"Well, that's good Jack, because your survey of the castle got ruined the other night." Harry replied with a grin.

"Yeah, Madam Pomfrey told me about it. Said you had something to do with it also. So what did you do?"

"Well, we have an outer wall now. I haven't been out to it, but I noticed it when I went out to do my morning run on the Quidditch pitch. And the castle looks different."

Jack shook his head ruefully, "I tell ya kid, when you hose a plan, you really HOSE a plan! Just as well that I'll have two feet again. Hey! Did ya see this morning's paper? Check this out! Looks like your Ministry's finally getting its act together."

Jack handed Harry a copy of the daily prophet.

Ministry announces lightening raids capture 15 Death Eaters, Goblins to Guard Azkaban Prison!By Rita Skeeter

A spokesperson for the Ministry's Department of Magical Law Enforcement announced that, in a series of lightening raids, fifteen Death Eaters were arrested last night. The spokesperson went on to say that no Aurors were injured in the raids. If convicted, the fifteen will be sentenced to ten years in prison. Azkaban prison, which was destroyed last year, is being rebuilt and currently has capacity for 100 prisoners. This paper has also learned that the Ministry has negotiated for a Goblin guard force. The guard force will include an unknown number of Goblins and Dragons. The Ministry spokesperson declined to comment on this, and the office of the Minister for Magic was unavailable at press time...

"Well, that's good news. And for once they left me out of the headline!" exclaimed Harry.

"Why would they have put you in the headline... wait a sec, Harry... How were you involved in this?" asked Jack.

Harry told him about the message he had passed from the Goblin Government to the Wizard Government. Jack sat, shaking his head and chuckling. "Harry, one of these days you're going to find out what it's like to be a normal kid. But right now it sounds like you're the mover and the shaker in this dive."

They talked for a while longer until Madam Pomfrey chased Harry out of the infirmary, saying she didn't want to see him when he's healthy. He left chuckling, heading down to the Great Hall for breakfast.

Once there, he was shocked to discover all of the house tables were gone, along with the head table. They'd been replaced with smaller round tables seating about ten people each. The teachers were forced to sit among the students.

Ginny waved at him from one table. His other friends were there, along with Professor McGonagall. He kissed Ginny on the head as he sat next to her.

"Good morning everyone, Professor," Harry said.

"Where were you Harry? I checked the pitch to see if we could run together, but you weren't there," Ginny asked.

"I got up early, Gin. After my run, I went to visit Jack in the infirmary. He's doing great," he replied.

Professor McGonagall cleared her throat and looked sternly at Harry.

"Mr. Potter, the Headmaster has informed me of your desire to test early for NEWTS in DADA, Charms and Transfiguration. I can't say I was pleased about this until he explained what the other alternatives were. I

have spoken to your instructors in Charms and DADA. They have agreed that you will still come to class, but you will use that time to study for the exams. The earliest we can schedule them will be in three weeks."

"Thank you Professor, I really didn't want to drop those courses," he said.

"Hermione, I think we'll wait until all of the advanced Defense classes have met before we schedule a meeting for the full DA. Pass the word that we won't meet until next week," Harry said.

He glanced over at a table full of first year students and frowned.

"Harry, what's wrong?" Ginny asked.

He pointed at the table with the first years and everyone turned to look at them.

"I don't see anything wrong Harry," said Hermione.

"It's those Stonesmith twins, Eric and Erika. Yesterday, they had hair as brown as yours Hermione. Now it's lighter, almost a red. How do you suppose they managed that?"

Now McGonagall eyed the two first years, her brow furrowed in concentration. "Are you certain about the hair color change?"

"Yes, Professor. It was dark brown yesterday. Like Hermione's hair color."

"Interesting. I'll keep an eye on them, Mr. Potter."

"What's your schedule like today, Harry?" ask Hermione.

Harry frowned. "Well, for some reason the Headmaster wants me to assist Professor Snape in his first year DADA class. Then I have transfiguration and charms before lunch. After lunch, DADA for myself, and herbology. Tomorrow we start off with seventh year advanced defense. Speaking of which, have you come up with that security measure we talked about for the DA, Hermione?"

Hermione nodded but, before she could speak, Professor McGonagall interrupted. "Mr. Potter, it should be obvious to you why the Headmaster is having you assist Professor Snape. He didn't fill out that schedule to make your life more difficult. He is aware of your desire to teach after leaving school and he wanted to give you as much exposure to teaching situations as possible."

Harry leaned forward, looking very thoughtful. "That never occurred to me, Professor. Yes, now it makes sense."

McGonagall smiled ever so slightly. "I think you will find, Professor Potter, that the Headmaster usually has valid reasons for what he does. Although, I will admit that some times, even he needs a kick in the pants. Now, I suggest you get off to your first class. It's not good for a teacher to be late to his first class."

Harry quickly grabbed one last bite, kissed Ginny and left the Great Hall in a rush.

McGonagall watched the young man leave then turned to Ginny. "That man may look like his father Miss Weasley, but he has his mother's sense of responsibility about him. Every time I see the two of you together, I cannot help but be reminded of his parents when they were here in school."

When the young woman blushed, McGonagall turned her attention back to the first year tables.

First Year Defense Against the Dark Arts Class...

Harry arrived just a few minutes before the students. Professor Snape told him to take a seat in the back of the class, where he could study for his exams until the students began working on practical aspects of the class, at which point he was expected to walk the class and help those students who were having problems.

Once the students filed in, Professor Snape waited for them to take seats. Harry noticed both Eric and Erika trying to wave to him from their seats.

Professor Snape began his lecture. "This is first year Defense against the Dark Arts class. In this class we will teach you how to defend yourself from evil wizards and witches, as well as how to defend yourself against some of the magical creatures you might encounter..."

Harry opened his seventh year DADA textbook and tuned out Professor Snape's lecture. Most of the material was pretty easy for him. Some of it simply didn't apply to him at all, but he read it anyway. When the class pulled out their wands, he set his book aside.

This was simple stuff. The students were at the point of learning how to properly hold their wands. Harry walked around the class, correcting grips here and there. He stopped near Erika, but she didn't seem to be having any problems with how she held her wand.

Eric, on the other hand, wasn't having as much luck.

"Eric, can I show you how to hold it?" Harry asked softly.

"I guess. I never thought I'd have to learn how to hold a stick," the small boy replied.

"Eric, it's not just a stick." Harry said, trying to hide his smile. "The magical core in your wand helps focus your magic. Now, hold your wand like this, then give it a little twirl and say the word 'Lumos'."

Eric carefully watched how Harry held and twirled the wand. He repeated the words and his wand's tip flared up brightly.

"Excellent Eric! That's a simple spell for when you need light in the dark. You can turn it off by saying 'Nox'."

Eric turned off the light and looked up at Harry with gratitude. "I guess it's not a stick after all."

Harry patted him on the back. Turning to see if anyone else was having problems, Harry discovered half the class was trying the spell he had just shown Eric.

Professor Snape sat at his desk, a hand covering his mouth. Was that a smile he was trying to hide? Harry shook his head and went about showing the others how to cast Lumos.

Hermione and Blaise Zabini...

Later that day Hermione caught up to Blaise in the library. Although Blaise was now officially part of what Harry called his core team, Blaise knew that Hermione was higher up in authority within the DA.

"Blaise," said Hermione, "can we talk for a moment?"

"Sure Hermione, what can I do for you?" Blaise asked.

"I'm worried about Harry and Ginny. If something happens to Ginny, it would kill Harry. It's his weakest link, Blaise and I think we need to make sure she's protected."

Blaise's eyes narrowed. "We can do that Hermione. I take it you don't want her to know we have someone watching her?"

"It would really be best if she didn't know about it," replied Hermione.

"All right, I'll get some of my guys on it."

Advanced Defense Class...

Harry watched as the group of seventh years filed in. There were over forty, twenty of them from the original DA. Professor Snape and Professor Parsons were sitting in chairs off to one side, watching.

Harry stood up and went to the center of the raised stage in front of the class.

"Welcome to the first class of Advanced Defense. Some of you are DA members, others are new and want to join the DA. The purpose here is to give you the chance to learn some of what you'll need to know.

"We'll meet in this class, then spend at least one hour every night in regular DA meetings. Your squad leaders will also have you out running every morning. If any of you have a problem with this, now is the time to leave.

"This is not going to be fun. It's going to be painful, and in the end some of you may get hurt, or killed. You all know what we did last term, and we're going to be doing it again this year. In this class you'll learn some of the spells you need to know.

"When you attend DA meetings...and you will attend them...you'll learn how to cooperate with your fellow members. I'll tell you this now. If you have no intention of joining the DA, then you need to leave. This class is for DA members only!"

Harry stood back and waited, watching the class. Finally Blaise stood up.

"Harry, I think most of us here are with you without question. But I also think it's time we had an official name change. Everyone but you calls us Potter's Companions. I think we should make that the official name."

There were murmurs of agreement from within the class, Harry looked stunned.

"B-B-But..." he stammered.

Jack Parsons stood up and stopped Harry before he could go any farther. "Harry, I agree that we need a name change. But I understand why you don't want them to be called Potter's Companions. I've given this a lot of thought because my own military is rife with units informally named after their commander. So, here's a suggestion, and it's in keeping with the magical aspects of your unit. Why not call yourselves the Phoenix Brigade?"

The students all looked around at each other. The name Jack suggested obviously appealed to them. Ron, Hermione and Neville were bobbing their heads in agreement.

Harry was torn. It was true that the name really didn't apply, and he certainly didn't want his name attached to the unit name. But to change the name? Now? Harry mentally shrugged, Phoenix Brigade was far better than Potter's Companions. And it did make sense, considering the dress uniforms. Harry couldn't help feeling unhappy about the name change, but maybe at the meeting he could talk them out of it.

With a sigh, he said, "All right, we'll vote on a name change to the Phoenix Brigade at the first DA meeting next week. Today, we are going to work on aiming accuracy. The regular DA members here will assist you as you learn to hit your target accurately."

Harry conjured targets for the class to use, then called up the new students to take firing positions. The DA spread out, helping their new members when needed.

Professor McGonagall and the Lupins...

Remus and Tonks walked to Professor McGonagall's office and knocked on the door. They'd received a note from Minerva a few days ago, asking for them to come see her. Remus thought it was related to Harry in some way, but Tonks told him McGonagall would have contacted Molly, not them.

Entering the office at Minerva's invitation, Remus looked around a moment before saying, "You know, the only other times I've been in this office, I was in trouble. Now, nearly twenty years later, I can still feel the apprehension entering this place."

McGonagall smiled. "Well Remus, you were in here a fair number of times, although I daresay not as often as you deserved. I always suspected you were the brains behind your little band of pranksters."

Remus looked sheepish and scuffed the floor with his shoe. Tonks laughed, grabbing her husband's arm. "So Professor, unless you intend on giving my husband detention, I assume there is another reason for us being here?"

"Yes Nymphadora, actually there is. You see I need your help," said McGonagall.

Tonks winced at the sound of her first name. McGonagall was one of the few people who got away with using it. Both of them looked surprised that McGonagall would need help.

"My help, Professor?" asked Tonks.

"Yes Nymphadora. You will remember the difficulty I had in helping you train your metamorph abilities? Well, as the only living metamorph, I need your help in training."

Tonks gasped. "You've discovered a new metamorph?"

"Actually, I didn't discover a new metamorph. Your Mr. Potter discovered two of them and brought them to my attention. Eric and Erika Stonesmith, muggle born, but both pass the tests for basic Metamorphmagus capabilities. Strangely enough, they seemed to be almost linked. Rarely will you find one looking different than the other. I would like to introduce you to them and perhaps ask for your help in training them in their abilities."

Tonks looked downright eager to meet the twins. Remus watched his wife with amusement.

Professor McGonagall went to another door and spoke softly for a moment before two small children entered. Eric was holding Erika's hand. He looked at the three adults fearfully.

Something in Tonks stirred. She knelt in front of them. "Hello Eric, Erika, you can call me Tonks. This is my husband, Remus. Professor McGonagall asked me to meet you both. She thinks I might be able to help you."

Erika's eyes widened and Eric tried to hide behind her. "Really? Help us how?" Erika asked.

"Can you do this, Erika?" asked Tonks as she turned her hair blue.

Eric and Erika collectively hitched in their breaths. Both closed their eyes tight. As the adults watched, the children's hair began to lighten slowly. After a moment, their brown hair was streaked with red and they were both gasping with the effort. Tonks smiled.

"That was really good for a first try! I think I can help you learn to do that better, so much so you'll be able to do things like this."

In an instant Tonks changed her hair to brown and gave herself big floppy ears like a basset hound.

Eric and Erika giggled.

"Do you really think we can do that?" whispered Eric from behind his sister. Then, realizing what he had done, he ducked behind her again. Tonks changed herself back to her regular form.

"I'm sure of it Eric. Someday you'll be able to change your appearance any time you wish," replied Tonks.

"I'd like to be able to do that," Erika said shyly.

"Me too," whispered Eric from behind his sister.

"Well I'll be happy to help teach you both," said Tonks warmly, smiling at the pair. These kids are so damn cute! She thought. She stood and Professor McGonagall ushered the pair off to their next class with notes explaining why they were late.

"Minerva, I've never had much of a maternal instinct, but those are the most adorable kids I have ever seen!" Tonks exclaimed after the children had left the room.

"Quite so, and they are so polite. It's taking them a while to adjust to being here. As you can probably tell, the sister is the more dominant of the two, but Eric has started to overcome his shyness somewhat. Harry's been working with him in his defense class and he's turning out to be one of the better first year students, so far. So Nymphadora, can I say it's safe to assume you'll be willing to help train them?" asked McGonagall.

"How can I refuse, Minerva? As you said, I'm the only living metamorph and those are the two cutest kids I've ever seen. I have to help them. Let's say two hours a week, after dinner to start? Mondays and Fridays?" asked Tonks.

"Excellent Nymphadora! And thank you,"

Hogwarts, 15 minutes before curfew, a few nights later...

The attack was swift and sudden. The third year student had left the library, heading to the common room when he was grabbed from behind. A hand was clamped over his mouth and someone pinned his arms to his sides.

A dark figured stepped up before the small boy and punched him a couple times in the stomach before one of the others hissed, "Someone's coming!"

They pushed the boy to the ground and someone said in a low tone, "You got off lucky this time, half-blood!"

Choking back a sob, the boy climbed to his feet. He calmed himself for a moment and angrily wiped the tears from his eyes. Men don't cry, he thought. Squaring his shoulders, he walked to the common room, pretending that nothing had happened.

Passing Time...

For Harry, the first three weeks of school were brutal. Ginny would occasionally slip into his room late at night using Harry's invisibility cloak. Most nights he was happy to just curl up with her in his arms and sleep. Between studying and his classes, he had little energy for anything more. Harry had Remus pick up two

additional invisibility cloaks which he gave to Luna and Hermione. He figured if Ginny could use one, why shouldn't Luna and Hermione?

The first meeting of the DA was spirited to say the least. When Hermione pulled out the blood oath and asked that everyone sign it, there were quite a few protests, even from the old DA members. Harry quickly quelled them by reminding them exactly what they were fighting for. When the grumbling finally died down and the oaths were signed, they got to the important stuff.

A nearly unanimous vote, 151 for, 1 against, officially changed the name of the DA to the Phoenix Brigade. Unsurprisingly, Harry felt that somehow the name was a reference to his animagus form, even though that information wasn't generally known.

Helping out in Professor Snape's DADA classes turned out to be more fun than Harry had thought it'd be. Watching and helping the kids go through their paces was quite rewarding for him.

Hermione had managed to talk Dumbledore into allowing Ron, Neville and herself to take the DADA NEWT early as well. She had pointed out that, as part of Harry's core team, they could use the time it freed up in their schedules to assist Harry in his Advanced Defense course. Dumbledore probably regretted allowing her to talk him into that. Once the word got out, over twenty seventh year DA members made the same request, which Dumbledore reluctantly granted.

The school was relatively quiet during those three weeks, but there was one disturbing rumor going around that no one had been able to prove or disprove. It was said that two students had been beaten up, not enough to land in the infirmary, or if they had, not for long enough for anyone to notice their absence.

Somewhere in England Location unknown...
"Report," hissed Voldemort from his seat.

"All stands in readiness Master. We await your permission to begin," whispered the cowering Death Eater.

"And what of the Granger house?" asked Voldemort.

"The house is heavily guarded and warded, Master. It would take many squads and there would be no assurance that we could catch them before they escaped," said the cringing man. Voldemort hated to be told no.

Voldemort sat in silence for a moment before making his decision. "Permission is granted," the Dark Lord snapped.

"Yes Master!" The Death Eater ran from the chamber to send the signal.

Voldemort leaned back in his chair, his perpetual scowl deepened even further. The Aurors had rounded up less than forty of his servants. That was bad enough, but they had managed to cut off access to funds of nearly a hundred others. The loss of funds was a big problem for him. He had an army which he must keep fed and equipped.

Damn those fools at the ministry! He snarled to himself. How dare they move his servants to the new prison at Azkaban! I'm not strong enough yet to take on the Goblin Nation!

Perhaps a new set of atrocities would scare the Ministry into minding its own business.

Newcastle-Upon-Tyne...

The house looked ordinary enough. Set back a ways from the street, the home was dark.

The team of ten Death Eaters surrounded the house and sealed all the possible exits. Then, as one, they raised their wands and set the house ablaze. They stood there for a while as the people screamed and burned. Before leaving, one turned and cast the Death Mark, setting it afloat above the raging inferno.

The same scene was repeated in Sheffield, Reading, Exeter, Kirkwall and five other cities across England.

Hogwarts...

As the first house burst into flame, Harry Potter awoke with a gasp. He was filled with a sense of loss and dread the likes of which he had never felt before. Not understanding why he felt this way, he crept carefully from his bed so as not to wake Ginny.

He pulled on his robe and stumbled down to the common room where he curled up on a couch, his knees tucked close to his chest. He gazed out at the fire as the sense of loss mounted in him. In minutes, the sense of loss mounted. He never knew when the tears started, or when they turned to deep, shuddering sobs that racked his body.

Ginny woke up a few minutes later when she reached for Harry and found him gone. Throwing on a robe, she went looking for him. She expected that she'd have to go to the Room of Requirement, where she'd find him training again. She was surprised upon entering the common room to hear him crying in front of one of the fireplaces.

After spending several minutes trying and failing to even get Harry's attention she ran to get Hermione from the dorm. Once back, they pulled Harry up into a sitting position. Ginny wrapped her arms around him, but Harry was still beyond their reach. Hermione looked at two for a moment longer, then she made her decision.

"Ginny, I'm going to go get Madam Pomfrey. This isn't normal, he needs help."

Ginny could only nod at as she tried to comfort Harry.

Hermione hadn't taken three steps when a door opened, admitting Professor Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey, both wearing sleeping robes.

"Professor! I was... Harry..."

"Be at ease, Miss Granger. Madam Pomfrey should be able to help Harry."

"But Professor, what's wrong with him? He's not responding to us at all."

"Alas, Miss Granger, young Harry is a true child of the light. He feels any diminishing of the light most keenly. When I sensed Harry's grief, I awoke Madam Pomfrey. I do not know what has happened, and I dare say that Harry himself does not know. All he knows is that tonight, something dreadful has diminished the light and he grieves for its loss."

The two watched as Madam Pomfrey and Ginny tried to calm him. It took nearly twenty minutes before Harry started to come around enough to drink the calming draught Madam Pomfrey had brought with her. They watched as the draught took effect and the tension in Harry eased.

"Harry," asked Dumbledore in a gentle voice, "do you know what's happened tonight? Can you tell us anything?"

"I don't know Headmaster. Something terrible has happened. Many good people are gone, but I don't know how or why," he whispered in reply.

"Sleep is the best medicine for him now, Headmaster," Poppy said softly.

"Ah yes. Thank you Poppy. I shall see him to his bed," replied Dumbledore.

She nodded and turned to leave. Dumbledore waited until the medi-witch was gone before turning back to the others. Harry was sleeping in Ginny's arms.

"Miss Weasley, Miss Granger," he said softly, with a twinkle in his eye. "I am not unaware of your unusual sleeping arrangements this year. Officially, I cannot allow it to continue. Therefore I trust you will be discrete enough to make sure I never learn of this officially?"

Both witches looked at him in shock and nodded their heads dumbly.

"Very well then. I will leave you with the task of returning Harry to his bed. I daresay he would appreciate the comfort of someone he loves holding him tonight," he said with a smile, looking pointedly at Ginny.

With that, he turned and left the room, leaving the two girls gaping at his retreating back. Ginny and Hermione looked at each other for a long moment before Ginny levitated Harry. Moving him to his bed, she climbed in after him and held him tight.

The next morning Ginny awoke to a very pleasant sensation. Harry held her in both arms and every so often he'd lean over her and kiss her softly. There was no passion, no lust in the kiss. She blinked her eyes and looked at him.

"Thank you, Gin. You have no idea how much I needed you last night," he whispered.

That morning Harry and Ginny made their way to what was quickly becoming "their" table, and were surprised to see that Dumbledore had joined them. The Headmaster smiled sadly at the pair as they sat down. Neither questioned the pain they saw in the old wizard's eyes.

Harry saw enough of the Daily Prophet headlines on his way to breakfast to make him shudder. He watched as Professor Sprout and Professor Flitwick each approached a student. Both were third years that Harry had never met.

As the Professors led their charges from the Great Hall, the Headmaster stood. Watching them leave, Harry suddenly realized what had just happened. He closed his eyes tightly for a moment, and then spun to face Hermione.

"Get them out of there, Hermione. They aren't safe! Get them out of there today. Send them to the Burrow, or Grimmauld, or out of the country!"

Hermione looked startled by Harry's intense reaction. His eyes glowed with power as he stared at her. Ginny gripped his hand hard, unsure of what was happening.

Dumbledore sighed. "I'm afraid I have to agree with Harry, Miss Granger. Last night's attacks are probably just the first, and they were directed exclusively against the families of muggleborn witches and wizards. Although your parents house is well protected, it is not totally safe. They would do well to move to another location, at least for a while."

The blood drained from Hermione's face as understanding dawned on her.

"Since your parents are probably still home at this hour, if you like, I will make you a portkey that will take you to your home, and from there to Grimmauld Place. Since Harry owns the house, I am sure he would not

have a problem with them staying there. And from what I understand, the move would not extend their commute to work by a significant amount of time. Remus could pick up their automobile and bring it to Grimmauld Place."

Hermione looked around. Every one of her friend's faces was urging her to do this. She could only nod her acceptance of the Professor's offer. Dumbledore stood up and headed to his office, Hermione in tow.

Hogwarts Great Hall, at a nearby table...

Wan Chang sat with her friends watching the Headmaster and the Head Girl leave the Great Hall. She and her friends were busy laughing at the headlines and chortling about how the mudbloods and half-bloods were finally getting what they deserved.

She was interrupted by the arrival of an owl carrying a letter. A letter from Danny! She missed him so much! She missed the feel of his arms around her, the gentle strength he used when making love to her.

Eagerly, she opened the letter. It was flowerly and romantic. He missed her too, and his heart was breaking without her. It was only when she got to the second page that the last paragraph turned to important matters.

Attached to the second page was a small envelope containing a white powder. She quickly pocketed the powder and glanced around guiltily. No one was paying any attention to her.

Her eyes scanned the room and came to rest on Harry Potter. He was hugging that full blood traitor Weasley. Her eyes narrowed. You'll get what's coming to you, filthy half-blood, she thought.

Advanced Defense Class with Professor Parsons...

Jack Parsons was running the class today. Harry and Professor Snape were up in the castle, while Jack took the class out for what he called a mild jog. With the return of his leg, he exercised himself and the class mercilessly. He had taken to collecting all their wands before taking them outside. Then he'd run them around the lake. He ran with an old riding crop he'd found somewhere. He sometimes called it his 'motivator' and sometimes just a plain old fashioned 'butt whacker'.

The older members from the days of the DA had little trouble during his run. The newer members, however, found themselves highly motivated to keep up after more than a few encounters with his motivator. He also taught them songs to sing as they ran around the lake, which were creating quite a stir among the other Professors. Songs like;

I don't know, but I've been told.

Voldie's balls are made of mold!

I don't know but it's been said.

Hogwarts kids are best in bed!

Sound off

one two

Sound again

three four

Cadence count

one two three four!

This was the least offensive of the songs he was teaching them. The students, however, came to enjoy these dirty little ditties and started making songs up for themselves.

The only problem Jack had was when he pushed Harry to join them on their run around the lake. He had refused, and wouldn't explain why to Jack. It was only after Ron pulled him aside and explained what had happened to Harry last year on that run that he stopped pushing about it.

Early NEWTS...

The day of his early NEWT testing had finally arrived. Harry had crammed in as much studying as possible. He had to admit that he was rather gratified to discover that he wasn't the only one taking the NEWTS early, but he was the only one taking Charms and Transfiguration NEWTS.

Both the practical and written portions of the Charms and Transfiguration tests turned out to be ridiculously easy for him. DADA was easy in the written, but for some strange reason the teachers decided to torture him on the practical.

It started out with a duel between him and Professor Snape, which he won, simply by using Expelliarmus, blowing through Professor Snape's shields and ripping his wand from his hand. That duel lasted ten seconds.

Next, they brought in Professor Flitwick. He was a little tougher, but in less than a minute, Harry had his favorite teacher bound and floating upside down, a good four feet off the floor.

"Bravo!" the diminutive Professor shouted, grinning hugely as he was lowered gently to the floor and unbound.

Since Tonks was visiting that day, she took Flitwick's place. Unfortunately, Harry understood her greatest weakness, her own body. He conjured thousands of ball bearings at her feet, then fired a bludgeoning spell at her. In her attempt to dodge, she slipped and her wand went flying out of her hand.

With this third defeat, the teachers conferred for a moment, while the other DA members who'd taken their exam watched. When Dumbledore walked in, every head turned in his direction.

"Did someone need me?" the Headmaster asked.

"Yes Headmaster," Snape said, "we do. We've tried three opponents against Mr. Potter and have been unable to make the test last the regulation five minutes required. The longest duel lasted just under a minute."

Dumbledore arched an eyebrow at Severus, then glanced at Harry with a twinkle. "Perhaps I can give us the five minutes he requires."

Harry gulped nervously. He had fought simulations controlled by Dumbledore and won, but this would be the real thing. A duel with Dumbledore, without any delay coming from controlling a simulation.

Dumbledore moved to the opponents position and almost immediately he cast a shield.

Harry tried firing off some of the standard spells. Stupefies, Expelliarmus and bludgeoning spells shot forth. Dumbledore blocked or dodged these spells with ease.

Then Dumbledore fired off a rapid volley of spells in return. Harry was forced to concentrate on blocking and dodging these. Dumbledore continued firing spells until one finally clipped Harry in his side, sending him spinning.

Harry's side hurt. He knew it was probably badly bruised. But even more importantly, so was his ego. Harry turned to look at Dumbledore and his eyes narrowed. So that's how he wants to play it, eh? He thought.

With one hand, he cast a Sun Fire spell, normally used for Stadium night lighting. The other hand cast a series of bludgeoning spells. The Sun Fire spell arced out over Dumbledore. He ignored it because it wasn't aimed to hit him; then it flared into life. The intense white light blasted down at Dumbledore and he staggered, blind and unable to see the bludgeoning spells boring down on him. Most missed, but one hit him squarely in the shoulder, dislocating it. Dumbledore reeled backwards and fell to the ground.

Dumbledore slowly regained his feet and switched wand hands. He quickly cast a pain relieving charm on the wounded shoulder. The two then continued to exchange spells, neither able to gain a clear advantage over the other.

Harry slowly inched his way forward, closing the distance between them. He had a plan, but it was dangerous. Closing the distance meant the spells had a much shorter travel time. When he thought he was close enough, Dumbledore fired off a nasty flame spell and Harry micro-apparated the distance. Dumbledore lost sight of Harry for a moment because of his flame spell.

Suddenly the Headmaster froze. Harry was standing on his left side, his wand pressed up against Dumbledore's neck. The two men stood still as they both watched the magical timer count down the last sixty seconds.

When the timer hit zero, Dumbledore said with a grin, "I yield my boy! Excellently done! Now, perhaps you and I should go visit Madam Pomfrey?"

Harry lowered his wand, his side really hurting. "Yes Sir, I do believe that would be a good idea."

With Harry holding his side and Dumbledore favoring his shoulder, they both walked out of the room discussing the duel, leaving two teachers, one Auror and twenty three students staring at them like they were out of their minds.

Dumbledore and Harry arriving at the same time, injured, was enough to send Madam Pomfrey into a tizzy. When she learned they had done it dueling, she started treating Dumbledore like another student, berating and bullying him for injuring himself and another student.

Both Dumbledore and Harry took the scolding with bemused looks. They weren't about to voice any complaints to the person who was going to take the pain away.

Harry was grateful. Had Dumbledore not intervened, the testing may have gone on for hours before hitting the mandatory five-minute dueling mark. He knew this was one story that few people would learn about. The students had been told that, if they divulge that they had been allowed to take a NEWT exam early, they would lose the score and be forced to take it again at the end of the year.

Dumbledore assured Harry and the other students that, at a minimum, they would know their scores by the end of the week. In the meantime, they would continue their regular classes as if nothing had changed.

Ginny...

As the month of September wound down, Ginny started noticing something odd going on. She couldn't put her finger on it, but she had the distinct impression that she was being watched.

It took her a while to notice that she always seemed to be in a room with at least two Brigade members. At first, she shrugged it off as just being scheduled in the same classes. But then she started noticing that, even when going between classes, there was someone using an illusion charm following her. The more she thought about it, the angrier she got.

It finally came to a head late one night. Harry and Ginny were walking alone back to the common room from a DA meeting and Ginny noticed the illusioned students trailing behind them.

When Harry went to put his arm around her shoulder, she shrugged him off and pulled him into an empty classroom. Once they were both inside, she cast a locking charm and a silencing charm on the door. Then she turned to glare at Harry, her hands on her hips.

Harry was confused, he could see she was angry, but didn't know why.

"Gin?" he asked.

"Don't you Gin me, Harry! I want to know what the hell you think you're doing!"

"Wha..."

"What? Do you think I'm some sort of child who needs your protection, Harry? Is that how you see me? Don't you think I'm capable of taking care of myself? **WHAT IN THE NINE HELLS IS WRONG WITH YOU, POTTER!**"

"Gin I..."

"CALL OFF YOUR GOONS, POTTER! I DON'T NEED YOUR PROTECTION! I GOT ENOUGH OF THAT FROM MY FAMILY. ARGH! HOW COULD YOU DO THAT TO ME?"

"Gin, I don't know what you're talking about..."

She stiffened. She pulled her engagement ring off her finger and threw it at his feet. "I don't believe you, Potter," she hissed at him. "And I can't love a liar."

With that she unlocked the door and left the room.

Harry bent down and picked up the ring, tears streaming down his face. Harry stood there for what seemed an eternity, before finally transforming into Wings and vanishing.

Ginny spent the next three days avoiding everyone. She had stopped going to the Brigade meetings. She noticed that Harry wasn't teaching the advanced defense class, but she didn't care. She took her meals either in the kitchen or sitting at a different table and refused to speak to anyone. She was too busy wallowing in her own anger and misery. Every time she thought her heart was going to break, she'd notice her shadows were still there and she'd get angry again. She felt Harry had betrayed her by not treating her as an equal, despite his words to the contrary.

She was eating breakfast in the Great Hall on the morning of the forth day when a shadow fell across her. She looked up to see Professor Dumbledore.

"Miss Weasley, if you would be so kind as to follow me please?"

She nodded and stood up to follow Dumbledore to his office. When they arrived, she found that Professors Snape, Professor McGonagall, Hermione and Ron were already there.

When Dumbledore waved her to the couch, she sat down, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Wasn't enough that she'd lost her fiancé?

"Tell me Miss Weasley, do you know where Harry Potter has gone?" asked Dumbledore gently. His eyes, however, lacked their usual warm twinkle.

"No, Sir. I've not seen him for the last few days."

"Might I ask where your engagement ring is, Miss Weasley?"

Ginny tried to hide her pain, then shrugged, "I suppose he has it. I threw it at his feet a couple nights back."

Ron's eyes bulged. Hermione looked aghast.

"But why, Ginny?" cried Hermione.

"He's set a watch over me by Brigade members, 'Mione, and when I confronted him about it, he lied to me. He promised he'd never lie to me. He promised he'd treat me as an equal and then he didn't," she spat.

"Oh Ginny! I'm so sorry. This is all my fault," Hermione cried. She turned to Ron and started sobbing on his shoulder. He put one arm around her and shot Ginny a venomous glare.

"You stupid girl!" Ron snapped. "It wasn't Harry that set the guard on you, he didn't know anything about it!"

"What! But why?"

"Hermione was convinced that if anything bad happened to you, Harry would lose his will to fight, maybe even to live. He's been missing now for three days because you didn't ask. You just assumed you knew the answers! And you've taken away from Harry the one thing he needed the most!" Ron raged back at her.

"Enough, please!" Dumbledore broke in. Ginny had turned white as a sheet as she realized the magnitude of the disaster she'd created.

"Right now it's imperative that we find Harry and bring him back. If he's gone after Voldemort before the appointed time, he will surely lose. Now, where could he possibly have gone?"

Ron looked up from trying to comfort Hermione. "He couldn't have gone to the Burrow, or to Grimmauld. You would have been sent a message on his arrival. That leaves the Leaky Cauldron, Diagon Alley or someplace in Hogsmeade. Harry can apparate, but he doesn't know too many places to go. I don't think he'd hide here at Hogwarts, unless he entered the Chamber of Secrets. In which case, there's no way to reach him down there."

"Severus, you check Diagon Ally. Serena, check the Leaky Cauldron, see if he may have rented a room there. I will contact the Order and get them searching Hogsmeade and the surrounding areas."

Serena and Severus immediately went to the Headmaster's floo and vanished. A moment later, the Headmaster placed a call to Grimmauld Place.

Finally Dumbledore pulled his head from the fireplace and returned to his desk. He looked at the three young people and sighed.

"Miss Weasley, this started as a misunderstanding between yourself and Harry. If we can find him, I believe we can fix this. But I should tell you, Harry is emotionally fragile. He may be unwilling to listen to anyone, should we find him."

"He'll listen to me," Ginny said, confidently.

"Why would he listen to you, Miss Weasley? You made your feelings plain when you threw the symbol of his love at his feet and stomped off like an immature child in a snit. Love requires trust, something you obviously have yet to learn."

Ginny's face flushed with anger. "What happens between Harry and I is none of your business!"

"You foolish girl! None of my business, is it? A student is missing! While I may have personal reasons for involving myself in this situation, as Headmaster of this school, it is also my responsibility, as is the reason behind it."

When Ginny leapt to her feet, enraged, Dumbledore barked, "Sit!"

"Now," Dumbledore continued coldly as she took her seat, "I have one question to ask you, Miss Weasley. Do you want him back in your life or not? If not, then you are excused back to the common room."

Ginny stared at the floor. "Please, I don't want to lose him, Headmaster," she whispered.

"You should have thought about that before ripping his heart out, young woman!" At her devastated look, Dumbledore sighed and relented slightly. "I don't think you have Ginevra," he said more kindly. "But it will take time to heal this breech, if it can be healed at all."

"You must learn to control yourself, my dear. I was under the obviously mistaken impression that your brother, Ronald, was the only Weasley to routinely stick his foot in his mouth and speak without thinking. I would suggest that, the next time you feel the need to act like a child, you conjure yourself a doll. You've just seen a graphic example of how much harm you can do with carelessly spoken words. If you can do something like this to the person you say you love, what are you capable of doing to others?" Dumbledore finished, softly.

Hermione had finally stopped crying. She looked over at Ginny with pleading eyes. "Ginny, I'm so sorry," she whispered.

She looked at Hermione, still pale as a ghost, and nodded her head shakily. What have I done? She asked herself. The Headmaster's right. Why didn't I believe Harry? He's never lied to me! Why would he suddenly start? Gods, there has to be a way of fixing this, please! I'll do anything...

They sat in silence, fearing the worst for what seemed like hours. Then the floo flared and Serena stepped out.

"He hasn't been to the Leaky Cauldron, Headmaster," she said.

After another long wait, the floo flared again. This time, Remus led Harry out of the fireplace. His robes were ripped and torn, he was filthy and looked like he hadn't eaten or slept in days. His shoulders were slumped, his eyes dull and lifeless. Ron and Hermione looked ready to jump up and embrace him, but Remus waved them off. Ginny stared at the floor.

Remus steered Harry to the couch and pushed him down next to Ginny.

Remus looked at everyone present. "Will someone tell me what the hell is going on? I found him in Sirius' old cave. He won't talk to me, and he looks like hell," the man raged.

Dumbledore waved him to silence. "Harry," he said, speaking softly, "Harry, Ginny still loves you. She was just confused by something someone else had done. Do you understand that, Harry?"

Harry looked at him. No he looked through him. His gaze was fixed elsewhere.

Ginny choked back a sob when he didn't respond. Dumbledore sighed and got up from his desk. He placed a hand on each of their heads and muttered an incantation. Both stiffened as the temporary bond Dumbledore had just created tightened around them, allowing each to feel the love, and the pain the other was feeling.

Hermione and Ron sat wide-eyed, not really knowing what was going on. When Harry reached out for Ginny's hand, those in the room sighed. It was something.

When Dumbledore finally released them, he staggered backwards. Remus leapt to his feet and grabbed the old wizard, helping him back to his chair. Ginny and Harry were holding each other, sobbing softly.

"Thank you. That is a most draining spell. Remus, take them to the guest quarters on this level, the password is 'Exploding Snap', then return here. I daresay they will both sleep for a while."

Remus helped the couple up and led them out of the room.

When the door closed, Minerva turned to Dumbledore. "Headmaster, what did you do? He was practically catatonic when they brought him in."

"I know Minerva. That is exactly why I did what I did. I created a bond between them, allowing each to feel the emotions of the other, the love, the hurt and the fear. Having experienced the other's feelings, they automatically reached out for each other. Had they not, I would have sent Harry to the infirmary and Miss Weasley to her dorm, or perhaps away from the school entirely. Their love for each other is stronger than the pain they are feeling. The bond will only last a few days but they will become stronger for it. However, I think I shall keep an eye on them for the next few days."

Guest quarters with Harry and Ginny...

Ginny awoke in a strange bed. It took a moment to remember how she had gotten there. She looked across the room where another lay on a bed, still sleeping. She didn't know what Dumbledore had done to them, but she now knew the pain and hurt she was feeling wasn't just hers. She climbed out of bed and went over to Harry. She hadn't had the courage to look at him in Dumbledore's office.

He looked dreadful. Even asleep he looked exhausted, his face covered with nearly four days growth of beard. His clothing was torn and dirty. She sat on the bed facing him, wanting to touch him, to hold him, but she was afraid.

Harry was sound asleep, but something impinged on his consciousness. He could feel Ginny nearby and her desperate need. He clawed his way awake and slowly cracked an eye open to peer up at her. Ginny sat beside him, but she wasn't seeing him. She was focused inward, concentrating on what she was feeling through the link.

Merlin, she's so beautiful, he thought. He couldn't help it, whenever he looked at her that same thought popped into his mind. He longed to reach out and hold her.

Ginny blinked as the link between them suddenly changed. Before, there was a terrible sense of loss and hurt, now the feelings diminished and she could feel the link flare with a wonder and a longing. She was reeled under the impact of understanding how he felt for her, the hurt was still there, but the love was stronger. Her own feelings flooded back to Harry. Her love and a crushing pain from how she had hurt him, a doubt in herself that she was unworthy of his love.

Neither said a word. They simply looked at each other and exchanged emotions via the link Dumbledore had put in place. She couldn't get past her fear that she had damaged the relationship beyond repair. Then Harry reached out and touched her. Both gasped as the bond opened wide, passing a thousand emotions in a split second.

They would have sat like that forever, but were interrupted when Dumbledore entered the room. He looked at the two for a long moment before smiling at them and inviting them to sit at a table with him.

Harry groaned as he climbed out of bed. Every bone in his body ached. He was so tired still! Ginny stepped over to him and helped him to the table as Dumbledore conjured a meal for the both of them. Harry took one

look at the food in front of him and immediately started eating. He hadn't eaten in four days and he was famished. Ginny picked at her food.

Dumbledore watched them for a moment before speaking. "I must apologize to you both. You were both hurting so much that I'm afraid I took a rather hasty action. I invoked a bond between you two that is normally used only by couples that have been married a long time. In your case, the bond is temporary and should fade in a day or two. What you are both feeling are the emotions of the other person. It was, in my opinion, the only way to get you both to see how you each felt about the other, and to get you to understand that you both have a great capacity to hurt the other, in ways that exceed physical pain."

Harry spoke for the first time in days, his voice hoarse. "It's temporary?" Then he muttered, "I wouldn't mind if it were permanent..." He shot a shy glance at Ginny who was blushing at his comment.

Dumbledore smiled at his comment. This may be easier than I thought it would be, he thought.

"Harry, when the times comes and you both agree to it, I will be happy to help you with the soul binding. Done properly, you'll be able to exchange thoughts as well as emotions. It does allow for a more harmonious household. In fact Miss Weasley, I helped bind your parents shortly after you were born."

Ginny looked up sharply at that. That explained a lot of things! Ginny felt a tug on her sleeve. As soon as her attention turned back to Harry, she felt the flood of emotions come back through the link. She looked down to see Harry had her ring in his hand.

He was offering it back to her! She looked back up at him and could feel his love, this time tinged with hope and a fear that she would refuse it. She reached out and took the ring. It was still pulsating softly and it flared brightly when she put it back onto her finger.

Dumbledore smiled at the two. "I will leave you alone today. I suggest you both rest and talk. I think you have a lot to discuss." He stood and cast a cleansing charm on Harry. It wasn't as good as a shower, but it served. Dumbledore turned and left the room.

"Ginny," Harry said softly, "what have I ever done that would give you reason to mistrust me?"

"I'm sorry, Harry. I was so used to my family treating me like a little girl and not trusting me. I automatically assumed you were doing the same thing," she said.

"I'm sorry you felt that way, but I'm not your family. You need to learn to trust me. You didn't even give me the chance to explain."

She leaned over and touched his hand and the link flared, flooding Harry with her anguish and it tore at his heart. With a strangled cry, he pulled her completely out of her seat and into his arms, holding her tight. They stayed locked together for a time before Ginny finally pulled back and looked at him closely.

"Love, you need to sleep. You're exhausted. When you get up, you definitely need to shave. You're all scratchy."

He smiled at her, replying, "That'll have to wait. I don't have my razor here."

She rolled her eyes at him and grinned. Casting a charm on her hand, she caressed his face for a few moments before removing her hand.

Harry reached up and touched his now smooth cheeks. "What was that?" he asked.

"A shaving charm. My Dad used to let me watch him shave when I was little. He taught me the charm. Now come on Harry, let's get you into bed."

He let her lead him over to the bed. He quickly pulled off most of his clothes before climbing in. Ginny shrugged out of most of her clothing, and joined him. He took her in his arms, kissed her on the forehead and was asleep within seconds.

Ginny lay awake for a long time, feeling his emotions flow through her. Peace, contentment and an overwhelming sense of this is where he belonged. Privately, she admitted to herself that this link wasn't such a bad thing.

Curling close to him, she slipped into sleep.

Chapter 6 - Pain and Anger Management

Ginny...

Ginny awoke a few hours later. She felt safe wrapped in Harry's arms, but the bond was still as strong as it had been.

She considered her actions of the last few days and found herself more than a little disgusted. She had come perilously close to hurting Harry and their relationship beyond repair.

She needed to put some distance between herself and Harry so she could think. She had noted that the link was stronger the closer she was to him, so if she moved over to the couch, it should be weak enough for her to consider what had happened without disturbing him. She gently moved away from Harry, who murmured his disapproval of her leaving in his sleep.

She padded over to the couch. She could still feel his love for her, but she could also feel the hurt. It throbbed like a dull ache and she knew she had caused that. How could I have been so stupid, she raged to herself. He'd done nothing and I tore his heart out! It's just like what Great Aunt Tilly said during that summer after my first year. She said I had to learn to control my emotions or they would control me!

He's done nothing but give me his love and his trust. He's never lied to me. I can feel what he feels for me, it's so sweet and pure, but there's an underlying ache that I caused and only I can make it go away.

She looked over at Harry and vowed she'd never doubt him again and she'd prove herself worthy of his trust. Somehow, she'd find a way to master her more violent emotions. She padded back to the bed and climbed in with him. Instinctively, he reached out for her. She was surprised to discover that dull ache had retreated a little, even in that brief time.

He might forget about, but I never will, she vowed.

Harry, half awake, nuzzled against her neck. He started to kiss her neck and her shoulder; one hand slid up to cup her breast through her bra. His eyes snapped open. He wasn't just feeling his own arousal, but hers as well. The two seemed to combine, making the sensations much more intense. He looked down into her eyes, seeing his reaction echoed there.

"Now I know why people wait until after they're married to do this soul bonding thing," he said softly. Then his eyes fluttered and he moaned against her as she slid her hand into his boxers and fondled him gently.

In response, he slid a hand in her panties and they both clung to each other as the sensations washed over them. Her release caused his and for a long time afterwards they lay panting and clinging to each other.

They lay in each other's arms, talking softly. Topics ranged from school, to the fight and what caused it, their wedding, and the final fight with Voldemort. After a long while, they decided to get dressed and head back to the common room. That discussion, more than anything else, had gone a long way to healing the pain between them.

Tonks and the Twins...

As Harry and Ginny made their way to the common room, Tonks made her way to Professor McGonagall's office to work with the Stonesmith twins. McGonagall was grateful for the help; when she had worked with Tonks, she'd only been able to draw on her own experience as an animagus to help Tonks. The younger woman remembered the experience as awkward and time consuming.

Working with the twins has been an eye opening experience for Tonks. Today she would continue to help them learn to change their hair color. She'd found that small victories were better than large failures. Changing one's hair color wasn't glamorous, but it could lead to a pattern of successful attempts to control the metamorphmagus abilities.

Normally the happy go lucky metamorph would be cycling through all sorts of transformations. But in dealing with the twins she kept a strict control. She had lost control just once in front of them and they had been terrified of some of the changes they saw her go through.

When she stepped into the office she found Professor McGonagall and the twins waiting for her. McGonagall was watching the process in case she ever needed to help another metamorph in the future.

Erika's face lit up when she saw Tonks.

"TONKS!" She dragged her brother forward. "Look at what we can do!"

Erika thrust her hand under Tonks' nose and screwed up her face in concentration. Slowly, her nails grew longer. Eric looked at his long nails in disgust and shrunk them back to normal.

Tonks was startled, but decided to let it pass for the moment. "That was excellent Eric, Erika! Have you been working on your exercises to change your hair color to blond?"

The two screwed up their faces in concentration and their hair started to lighten.

"Eric..." Erika whined. "Stop trying to make it blue!"

"Am not!" Eric said.

"Are too!" replied Erika.

Tonks snickered. "Now concentrate. Make your hair blond."

Slowly, their hair changed to a very dirty blond with a just a hint of blue at the tips.

Even McGonagall was pleased with the results. Tonks sent them a huge grin and told them how proud she was of their effort, though it had clearly tired them. She showed them a simple exercise, which might make the hair color change easier.

Eric was clearly not shy around his sister, but around everyone else, he was. As the lesson ended for the day, he moved behind Erika again.

"Are you really an Auror Tonks?" he asked from behind his sister.

"Yes, I'm an Auror. Who told you that?" Tonks asked.

"Oh, Professor Harry did. He said you were a great Auror, and his Auntie!" volunteered Erika. Eric nodded in agreement over her shoulder.

"Oh he did, did he? I'll have to remember to thank him appropriately," she replied.

After the twins left, Tonks turned to McGonagall. "Minerva, did you see? They're truly linked! What one does, the other can undo, or influence."

"Yes Nymphadora, I've been watching them closely for some weeks now and came to that conclusion myself. The truly sad part is, sooner or later, we'll have to split them up so they can learn to change themselves without influencing the other," said McGonagall.

"I suppose you're right, but I wonder if, at a later date, they couldn't use something like Occlumency to learn to shield themselves from each other? Assuming we could even get them apart long enough to try it. They're too young for Occlumency now, but it's something we may want to consider in a few years."

"An excellent suggestion, Nymphadora. I will make the Headmaster aware of it."

"Not to change the subject, but how's Harry? Remus told me what happened."

McGonagall frowned for a moment. "He had a nasty shock, but he and Miss Weasley seem to have patched things up. I think we all tend to forget that, despite being one of the most powerful wizards on record, he really has only begun to heal from his past with those muggles."

"I have no doubt that Miss Weasley will play an important part in that healing. But she also has the ability to hurt him, which she's only now coming to realize. I think that, ultimately, this will make their relationship stronger and probably have a bigger impact on Miss Weasley than it will on Harry."

"They are good for each other, Minerva. I'd like to say they are still kids, but to be honest, I don't know of any kid who's lived like Harry has. At times, he has an almost ancient look in his eyes. It's like he had a world of burdens on his shoulders and never had time to be a child. Ginny sometimes seems to be the same but you can still see the child in her if you look close enough."

The two women looked at each other before staring off, lost in their own thoughts.

The common room...

Ron and Hermione were sitting on a couch near a fireplace. Ron was working on his Quidditch playbook. He was the team captain for the Hogwarts Hornbacks this year. Hermione glanced up when Ginny and Harry came in through an entrance. Hermione was more than a little afraid, talking with Harry and Ginny. As far as she was concerned, it had been her, Hermione Jane Granger, who had been responsible for nearly causing the breakup of her two best friends.

Spotting the two, Ginny and Harry headed over to the couch and sat down with them.

"Harry..." Hermione began, but Harry cut her off.

"Mione, please, let me say this. I know what you did and I can understand why. But please, in the future, let's not keep any secrets from each other. This mess could have been cleared up so easily if you hadn't kept it secret. I don't hate you for it, and I'm not angry. You're family. We need to work together. Just don't do that again. Please?"

Hermione could see the plea in his eyes, and hear it in his voice. Standing, she turned and knelt between her two friends. She reached up a hand to touch both of them, her lower lip trembling. "I'm so sorry Harry, Ginny. I never meant to hurt either of you."

Harry and Ginny pulled Hermione into a three-way hug. Harry reached out with an arm and snagged a protesting Ron into a four-way hug.

Wan Chang watched the four hug from a nearby table. She wanted to throw up at the sight of two purebloods hugging a mudblood and a halfblood. Shuddering, she went back to rereading the latest letter from Danny. He had promised to meet her in Hogsmeade and told her he would reserve a room at the Three Broomsticks for them. He hinted that he may have her engagement ring by then. He also reminded her to let him know when she would use the powder.

When can I use that? It would have to be some time when the common room and dorms are nearly empty, she thought. That's not going to be easy. There's almost always someone around, unless there's a Quidditch match... Quidditch! Yes, that will work.

Wan went back to reading her letter, a slight smile on her lips.

The Dream...

Ginny had joined Harry again in his bed, but they were both physically and emotionally tired. The link between them had started to fade. It wasn't gone entirely, but some of the intensity had diminished.

Ginny lay in his arms. Harry had cast a silencing charm on the bed when she climbed in. Now the two were talking softly.

"How could I have been so stupid as to not trust you, Harry? You saved my life in the chamber, and many other times," she said softly against his shoulder.

Harry pulled her chin up gently so he could look into her eyes. "Are you still having bad dreams about the chamber, Gin?"

"No, not any more love. Not since the pensieve images at your birthday," she replied.

"You weren't stupid, Gin. Hermione was right in her own way, and I do worry about you. I just know not to try to openly protect you like that. I know you're good enough and can take care of yourself. However, if Voldemort comes after you, would you mind if I stepped in to protect you? Just a little bit?"

She nodded at him and gently kissed his shoulder, her hair tracing a thousand tickles across his arm. He shuddered in delight and tightened his grip on her. In a few minutes he was asleep.

Ginny lay awake, doing one of her favorite things; watching Harry. Even in sleep, he reached out for her. Sometimes he had bad dreams and her touch and voice would soothe him. Occasionally, he'd have a normal dream and he'd mumble in his sleep, saying amusing things she could tease him about.

She grinned as he started to mumble. He was dreaming.

It was a beautiful day. Harry was sitting out by their picnic spot. Looking around, he saw Ginny as she came bouncing around the big rock, carrying a picnic basket. Spotting Harry, she ran over to him and kissed him. Harry held her, delighting in how every soft curve of her body melted against him.

When they finally broke the embrace Ginny exclaimed, "I got the lunch!" and she held up the picnic basket.

She spread a blanket out and knelt down on it. Harry laid on his side, watching as she pulled items from the basket. Every so often, she'd turn and place an item directly into his mouth. Some cheese, a strawberry, a cracker.

Harry was astounded by both her beauty and her vitality. Her dress clung to every curve. He watched every move she made.

Finally, she turned to him and asked, "Would you like a sandwich, Harry?"

"I'll take anything from you Gin," he replied.

She opened one half of the lid to the picnic basket and removed the sword of Godric Gryffindor and handed it to him. It was impossible! The sword was three times the size of the basket, but she pulled it out anyway!

Ginny turned to rummage around in the basket again, her rump wiggling enticingly and she asked, "Harry, would you like some mustard to go with that sandwich?"

Harry gaped at her. Mustard on a sword? Suddenly the scene shifted.

It was a beautiful day. Harry was sitting out by their picnic spot. Looking around, he saw Ginny as she came bouncing around the big rock, carrying a picnic basket. Spotting Harry, she ran over to him and kissed him...

The Great Hall, breakfast...

Harry and Ginny strode into the Great Hall holding hands. Except for that odd dream he had had, he felt refreshed.

"Professor Harry!" shouted a little voice. "Come sit with us today!"

Harry grinned at Erika who was waving frantically and pointing to the two empty seats at their table.

"Well Gin? Shall we go sit with the little kids today?" he asked with a grin.

"Why not, Professor Harry? You're their favorite teacher," she replied smiling.

The two made their way over to the table filled with first year students. Harry was thrilled to see that Erika and Eric had made friends with kids their own age. But it seemed they had arrived at the table during a fight between Eric and Erika. Apparently Erika kept changing their hair blond and Eric kept adding a blue tint to it.

Erika finally had enough. "Professor Harry, make him stop. He keeps making our hair blue!"

"Am not!"

"Are too!"

"Am not!"

"Have either of you ever thought about just changing yourself, rather than changing both?" Harry asked.

Both kids looked at him with sympathy. Erika said, "But we're twins! We've always done things together."

Ginny slapped Harry playfully on the arm and said, "Yeah, they're twins! Don't you know about twins?"

He grinned at her, then turned back to the twins. "But you don't do everything together. You sleep in separate dorms and someday, Eric will have a girlfriend, and Erika will have a boyfriend."

Erika rolled her eyes at him. "Of course I'll have a boyfriend, and he's going to treat me just like you treat your girlfriend! She's just lucky I'm not older or I'd steal you away from her." Erika pointed at Ginny.

Eric tugged insistently on Erika's robe, she turned and he whispered something in her ear.

"No Eric! She's too old for you!"

Ginny's eye's bulged. Harry placed a hand on her arm. "You don't want her Eric. This one bites," he whispered loud enough for the whole table to hear.

Ginny turned a shade of red and started to retort but Eric asked, "If she bites, then why do you have her?"

Ginny turned to Harry and arched her eyebrows at him. "Yes, Professor Harry. Why do you?"

Harry leaned forward to the table and motioned everyone else to lean in. He looked around carefully like he was about to divulge a secret. Then he said, "Here's the secret to finding a girlfriend or boyfriend. Find a friend first, someone that makes you happy to be with. Then, a habit like biting won't bother you."

Then he leaned back and conjured a white lily, which he placed behind Ginny's ear. The group of first years broke up into a fit of giggles.

There was a polite cough behind Harry and all heads at the table jerked up and most gasped. Professor Dumbledore smiled gently at them.

"Professor Potter, when you're done with your breakfast, might I have a word with you in my office please?"

"Of course, Headmaster."

"And how are you today, Miss Weasley?" he asked.

"I'm better Headmaster. I think I've finally figured out what I have to do," Ginny said quietly.

"Excellent, Miss Weasley. As you have a free hour after lunch, please come to my office then. Oh, Professor Potter, this may interest you," he said, handing Harry a slip of parchment.

He then looked at his youngest charges and smiled. "Might I suggest you try one of the chocolate éclairs? They're quite good this morning."

As he walked away, a tray of éclairs appeared on the table. The students squealed as one and lunged for the tray.

Harry opened the parchment.

Harry,
I thought you would like to know the results of your examinations.
Charms, Theory O, Practical O
Transfiguration, Theory E, Practical O
DADA, Theory O, Practical O+

These results are most excellent Harry! You are excused from these classes for the remainder of the school year. You are also the only student in 200 years who has achieved an Outstanding with Distinction in Defense Against the Dark Arts. These grades put you well within reach of your goal as a Professor here at

Hogwarts, and they have been filed with the Ministry as well as the Board of Governors. Again, well done Harry, you have every right to feel proud of these scores.

Albus Dumbledore

Headmaster, Hogwarts school of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

As he passed the note to Ginny, he felt a tug on his robe. "Are you in trouble with the Headmaster Professor Harry? You have to go to his office after breakfast!" said Erika in a whisper, her eyes clearly showing her worry.

"Don't worry, Erika. If he gets out of line, I'll turn him into a goat," he replied, causing the students to giggle once more.

Ginny handed Harry back the parchment and whispered in his ear, "I'm so proud of you love!"

Headmaster's office...

Harry didn't know why the Headmaster wanted to see him, unless it was about his absence from the school for the last few days. Once again he approached the gargoyle guarding the entrance. Without a word, the Gargoyle sprang to life and started the staircase moving. Harry stepped onto it and rode the staircase up.

Entering the Headmaster's office, he noted that Professors Snape and McGonagall were present, along with another gentleman he didn't know. Dumbledore was in his usual place behind his desk.

"Ah Harry, come in, come in!" Dumbledore waved him in.

As Harry took a seat, he said, "Sir, if this is about my absence for the last few days, I can..."

"No my boy, that's quite alright. These things happen. But that's not the reason I called you here today. Let me introduce you to Mr. Smythe from the Ministry's Department of Mysteries. Thanks to a request by our Minister, they performed an exhaustive search of their archives and, unfortunately, didn't find anything in regard to your crystal. However, Mr. Smythe here remembered running across something a long time ago and he wanted to show it to you."

"Ahem, yes well, it was a long time ago and I was just a new employee when they had me cleaning out some storerooms," the gray haired man began. "I came upon a box, which I've brought with me today. The box apparently contains a shard of an essence stone. At least, that is what the label says. I looked at it back then, but it was only a small piece of a larger gem."

Smythe placed the box on the Headmasters desk and carefully opened it. Inside, resting on a velvet cushion was a small sliver of crystal, perhaps two inches long and an inch wide.

Harry leaned forward intently, staring at the sliver. "May I, Sir?"

Smythe nodded.

Harry carefully pulled the sliver out of the box and laid it in the palm of his hand. His eyes grew brighter and he started to murmur, "Yes, I can see it now. And it's not a naturally occurring stone at all. It's one hundred percent man made. It's very fragile, like an egg. No, even more fragile."

Harry's eyes grew distant and he turned his other hand palm upwards. The hand holding the shard became enveloped in a bright blue nimbus. His other hand glowed white as sparks began to appear, fly to a center point above his palm and vanish.

Smythe made a move to stop Harry, but all three teachers waved for him not to move. Slowly, Harry rebuilt the Essence Stone, using the map given to him by the shard. It was complex, made up of elements that

normally weren't found in crystals at all. Eventually, the sparkling of new pieces stopped and he carefully levitated the shard back into its box. Floating above his other hand was an egg sized stone that could best be described as sky blue. The stone pulsated with a light of its own.

He conjured a cushion and levitated the stone onto it before he leaned back with a sigh.

"My word! How extraordinary! Is that a complete Essence Stone, Mr. Potter?" asked Smythe.

"Yes, Sir. The pulsation is tied to the binding between the elements. As the pulsation dims, the binding loosens until it becomes very fragile. Right now it's pretty stable and will remain that way for a couple months. That's why Essence Stones broke apart so easily. Once the pulsation stopped, the stone could be broken with a kiss. It also explains why the practice didn't last. They probably couldn't come up with an Essence Stone that wouldn't break apart after a few months."

"My word Potter, it's beautiful. I've never seen anything quite like it," breathed McGonagall.

Harry nodded. "Yes, it's unique. It's not a naturally occurring stone at all. These stones were obviously man made from elements which wouldn't occur together in nature."

Harry looked to Dumbledore, "There you go, Sir, one Essence Stone. Something tells me it's very important, but I don't know why. I'll have Hermione talk to you about it. Perhaps now that we have one, we can figure out what good it is. It's far too fragile to channel magic. You already have my notes on it, and I can make as many as may be needed now."

Headmaster's office, after lunch...

Ginny approached the Headmaster's office with fear. He had been painfully clear yesterday how he had felt about her actions. She was afraid she was in for another tongue lashing today.

She knocked on the door, opened it when bid and entered the room.

"Come in, Miss Weasley. Please, have a seat," Dumbledore said. "Would you care for a lemon drop?"

"No, thank you, Professor," Ginny replied, sitting in a chair before the Headmaster's desk. She began to squirm as Dumbledore stared at her over his glasses. "Professor?" she asked when he remained silent. "Have I done something wrong?"

"Beyond the obvious, my dear?"

"Professor?" she questioned.

"I wouldn't say that it's so much something you've done, as something that is a part of you."

"A part of me?"

"Don't tell me you cannot see the flaw. I assure you, it is quite obvious to anyone who spends time with you."

Her eyes narrowed as she stared at him.

"Miss Weasley," he said softly, "your most obvious flaw is something you and your brother both suffer from. A flaw passed on from your mother."

Ginny's eyes widened and her anger flared. She opened her mouth, ready to jump to her family's defense, but paused at the last minute. Closing her mouth, she glared at the Headmaster, but remained silent. The anger was there, but she refused to rise to the old man's insult.

Dumbledore nodded approvingly and continued. "Yes, I do see you've come to recognize the problem. Your mother was famous for her temper and you and your brother inherited it from her. Now, I'm not here to cast disparagement on your family, but I am here to offer you a chance to learn to control that temper. I understand that Harry has taught you enough Occulmency to develop impressive shields. It is but a small step from Occulmency to Legilimency. I believe that if you learn even just the basics of that art, you will learn to master your emotions better."

Ginny gaped at him. Me? Be a Legilimens? On the other hand, if it could help...

Dumbledore smiled gently at her. "I see you understand the advantages of what I'm offering you, Ginevra. I believe that even if you fail to master the art, just understanding and learning the basic exercises will help you learn to control your negative emotions better."

"I understand Professor, and I really appreciate this. I don't want to ever make this kind of mistake again," she said softly.

He nodded at her understandingly. "You will still find there will be times when you will be angry with Harry, my dear. He is a most stubborn man. But if we can teach you how to express that anger in a better way, then you'll both be happier. Now then, I will expect to see you right after lunch on Monday's, Wednesdays, and Fridays."

"Yes sir, and thank you sir," she said softly.

"Since you're here, let us begin the first lesson. Clear your mind using your Occulmens method...."

Later that night...

A forth year student made her way to the common room after spending an hour completing a particularly difficult potion assignment. She never had a chance to scream when she was grabbed from behind.

Harry, Ron and Ginny were sitting in the common room. Harry was tired. He had spent part of his day working with his advanced defense class. Then he helped Professor Snape in his regular DADA classes. Later, he'd visited the Auror academy where they were training the Ministry soldiers.

Fortunately, Jack was providing a lot of help with the last one, and Kingsley had called Alastor Moody out of retirement to help teach the new spells that they were being given. The ministry didn't know that, on the suggestion of Blaise, they were getting only a subset of the much larger set of spells being taught to the Phoenix Brigade. Hermione had selectively labeled several spells as being "under development" and those had been held back from the Ministry.

Right now, Harry was sitting with Ginny, just enjoying her company and watching Eric trounce Ron again in Wizard's chess. So far, the two had played 52 games, and the best Ron had managed was a draw on four of them.

Erika sat nearby working on her transfiguration homework. The brother and sister had taken to spending a little time with the older students in the evenings. Harry and his friends didn't mind. Ron got himself a chess partner, and Erika could usually get homework help from Hermione.

Ginny leaned close to Harry and whispered, "I don't know about you, but I'm really liking that bond the Headmaster created. I wish it weren't fading. I can barely feel you now."

"There are other ways of achieving the same results, love," he whispered back. But Dumbledore's right, we don't want that particular spell to be made permanent until after we're married. If you're interested sometime, I'll show you a few tricks we can do."

Harry's conversation was interrupted a short while later when Hermione joined them, looking worried.

"Mione? What's wrong?" Harry asked, eying her.

"One of our fourth years was attacked tonight. She's in the infirmary right now with multiple broken bones. One of the prefects found her and then came to get me. Her name is Molly Anderson. Do you know her?"

"Anderson, she's a fourth year, from Ravenclaw if I remember rightly." His eyes narrowed and his face formed into a scowl, "She's a..." his eyes darted to the two first year students, leaving the word unsaid.

"Yes, Harry, she is," replied Hermione.

Harry looked at a wall clock, then turned to the two twins. "Sorry guys, but I think it's time for you to get to bed."

Protesting, they went up to their dorms. Ron, on the other hand, looked relieved that Harry had saved him from another crushing defeat. He reset the board and looked at Harry hopefully. Harry shook his head.

"Sorry Ron, not tonight. See if you can find Blaise and Neville, and bring them down here. Hermione, find Luna please. I think its time we have a talk among the command group of the Phoenix Brigade."

A few minutes later, the group was assembled. Harry conjured some extra chairs for them to sit in, and then cast a silencing charm around the group.

"Thank you for coming on such short notice. I'm not sure, but we might have a problem. I've heard rumors of lower year students, fourth, third, second and even a few first year students that have been beaten up recently. Mostly, these are rumors and the people involved have refused comment. But in my DADA classes, I've seen some of the bruises the kids are trying to hide."

"Now Hermione tells me that Molly Anderson is in the infirmary with several broken bones. All of these kids are muggleborn, halfbloods or close friends with one of those two groups. Molly is a muggleborn."

"Blaise, I think it's time to get together with Hermione and build up a list of possible targets. I'd ask Ron to help but, since tomorrow is his first Quidditch match as Captain of the Hornbacks, I'm not going to pull him away from that for now. Let's plan on meeting this time next week and see if we can shake out some information in the meantime."

"Oh, and Hermione? Just because I gave you something new to do doesn't mean I expect you to miss Ron playing tomorrow," He added with a smirk, ducking the throw pillow she tossed at his head.

First Quidditch Match of the season, 2nd weekend of October...

It was a chilly overcast Saturday. Harry, Ginny and Hermione sat in the stand closet to the Horntails goal posts so they could get a better view of Ron. The three friends sat huddled under a blanket and watched the game, drinking the Hot Chocolate that Harry had conjured for them. In short order, several other people noticed the drinks and Harry was conjuring hot drinks for everyone, including several of the teachers.

"Harry, do you miss playing?" asked Ginny. She had been watching him throughout the game and it was a question that had bugged her since last year.

"Yeah, I do, very much. There's something about zooming around the pitch on my Firebolt at top speed that just makes me want to shout for joy."

"I'm sorry you had to give it up," she said softly

Harry shrugged. "I'm not all that upset, Gin. I can still fly my broom. Besides, between you and 'Mione, we'll put together more than enough kids for a team of our own."

When Hermione turned to glare at him, Ginny laughed and said, "Harry thinks we're going to have four children, 'Mione. That means three for you and Ron."

"Oh, so you've mastered the art of Divination have you, Harry James Potter?" Hermione asked acidly.

"Mastered? Merlin no. Just call it a hunch if you will. I drew a picture of Ginny in front of a house and then I started adding children in the front yard. I stopped at four because it felt right. It's hard to explain, but lately some things have just felt right."

The friends turned their eyes back to the game in time to see the opposing team with the quaffle. One of the chasers was about to throw the quaffle into a ring when it changed into an octopus and grabbed hold of the player.

Harry's eye's narrowed and he scanned the field. He laughed suddenly when he spotted the twins sneaking from the pitch. He nudged Ginny, who eyed the twins retreating backs and joined him in his laughter.

Meanwhile, the player with the octopus started screaming and attempting to pull the sticky creature off of herself. Not paying attention to where she was flying, she hit the goal post had and fell to the ground, the quaffle next to her.

The game played on and no one noticed the lone owl winging away from Hogwarts to deliver its message.

Harry watched with keen interest as the seeker for the Hornbacks spotted the snitch. He nudged Ginny again and they watch the seekers from both teams race towards the golden ball.

"The Banshee seeker is going to crash if he doesn't pull out," Harry commented.

A moment later, the seeker plowed a furrow in the ground and went flipping head over heels in the dirt.

"See! Amateurs!"

Both Ginny and Hermione rolled their eyes at Harry's comment. The next minute they were on their feet, shouting as the Hornbacks seeker caught the snitch.

Somewhere in England, Location Unknown...

Voldemort listened to his servants with a contented glee. For once, everything was going well.

"My lord, we have successfully tested out our floo trap, so that is all prepared. We have received word of everything being ready in Hogwarts and Hogsmeade. Finally, considering the success of our last night of fires, we've doubled the number of teams to be ready for the next night of fires," said Wormtail.

"Excellent Wormtail, most excellent. I see that you really are competent now that you're out from under the shadow of Lucius and Bellatrix. I must think up a suitable reward for you."

Voldemort turned to another Death Eater. "What of the muggle Grangers? Have they been found yet?"

Wormtail shuffled back to his position, grateful that he wasn't responsible for the next set of reports.

"No, Master. We've searched everywhere. We believe that Dumbledore may be hiding them," the Death Eater stammered out.

Voldemort snarled and turned to another. "What about the Goblins? Are they willing to talk yet?"

"N-N-No, Master. The Goblin representative instructed me to pass along a message to you, stating that the Goblin nation intends to provide its full support behind the Ministry and Harry Potter," stuttered another Death Eater.

"POTTER!" Voldemort roared, causing the people in the room to flinch. "I WILL HAVE MY WAY WITH YOU SOON ENOUGH, POTTER!"

"Nagini," Voldemort hissed.

The huge snake uncurled itself from the back of his chair and leaned its head forward.

"Yes, my master," hissed the snake.

"You may have that one," he said pointing at the now blubbering Death Eater.

"Thank you, my lord," replied the snake.

Dreams and Nightmares...

It was just two days after the Quidditch game. Next weekend would be the first Hogsmeade weekend of the month.

Harry slept, drifting from one hazy image to another on the currents of his dreams. Relaxed and unbound he floated, as new images solidified around him.

Harry looked around. This was the living room of his Parent's place in Godric Hallow!

A much younger Remus brushed by him.

"Hi Harry!" he said as he passed.

"Umm... Hi Remus," he replied weakly.

Then Lily walked in. "Harry! You must be starving! Here, let me make you something to eat."

She rushed from the room and returned a moment later with a large sandwich, which she put into his hands.

"Your such a good boy, Harry. We're proud of you, my son," she whispered sadly.

She guided him over to the couch. As he sat down, Snuffles ran into the room and transformed into Sirius.

"Lily, look at his sandwich! YOU FORGOT THE CHEESE!" He roared at her.

From the corner, Remus whipped out his wand shouting, "CHEESE! YOU CANNOT FORGET THE CHEESE!"

Harry looked aghast as the sandwich in his hands transformed into the sword of Godric Gryffindor.

"Too much emphasis, Moony old boy. And you flicked when you should have swished," said Sirius smugly.

Harry was laughing too hard to hold onto the sword. It slipped and fell to the floor.

Ginny woke up when Harry started giggling. She could tell he was asleep, but he was giggling in his sleep! She had never heard of such a thing. She was about to start giggling right along with him when his expression changed to one of horror.

The scene suddenly shifted and a cold wind ran across his back, causing him to shudder violently.

He was in the death chamber again. Only now the room was full of people, all the people he considered family and friends.

He blinked and tried to scream, he tried to move. One by one his friends turned to look at him sadly before entering the veil.

Ginny was the last. She looked older somehow, more beautiful than ever. In her arms, she held a small infant who looked at him with bright red hair and green eyes.

Ginny looked at him and said, "You're not listening, Harry. That's why we all had to die. You killed us because you didn't listen!"

The baby altered shape and suddenly Ginny was carrying a sword.

With that, she and the sword walked into the veil.

Harry screamed, his voice suddenly free again. "GINNY! NOOOO!"

Harry started to thrash about. He was mumbling something she couldn't understand, but she could hear the anguish in his voice. She tried to hold him and comfort him, but it wasn't working tonight.

The scene shifted again. He was in number 4 Privet Drive. Uncle Vernon was bearing down on him and he reached for his sword. His Sword? No, he wanted a wand, not a sword. He dropped the sword and searched frantically for his wand.

Harry looked up to see a fist coming at him. He collapsed and whimpered, "No! Please don't hit me, uncle Vernon. Nooooo!"

For a brief moment, a glowing light appeared above the bed, and then it faded and was gone.

As the light disappeared, Harry awoke. He curled up into a tight ball, trembling violently. Ginny wrapped her arms around him.

"Shhh love, it was only a nightmare. It's all right, Harry," she breathed.

As Ginny's softly repeated words reached him, he relaxed and drifted off to sleep once more.

Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts...

Albus Dumbledore was reading over some of his correspondence and pondering the Essence Stone, sitting under a glass case on his desk, its soft pulsations somewhat comforting.

After reading and rereading Harry's notes about the stone, he couldn't help but be drawn to the fact that every use Harry had found for this crystal was related to a death ritual.

I wonder if our Harry has given me an answer to my puzzle of how to kill an immortal soul, he mused. Wait, perhaps it's not killing that is necessary. If the stone can trap it, and then...and then...what? If the stone can hold the soul, what do you do with it once it's inside? You have but a few months before the stone becomes too fragile to move, according to Harry. What do you do with it?

He scratched his head in bewilderment. As he saw it, there were two distinct problems. The first was, if the stone could hold a soul, then how to get the soul into the stone without destroying the stone in the process? Secondly, what does one do with a stone that contains an evil soul? Even if the stone was hidden in the most protected vault at Gringotts, someone could get it. Gringotts had been broken into before, after all. And sooner or later, the stone would break down anyway.

Dumbledore sighed. And if that wasn't pressing enough, the Ministry had asked that he, Severus and Serena attend a meeting Wednesday to discuss how to improve the Anti-Cruciatus potion they had invented. He was beginning to feel pressure closing in from all around him.

Merlin if this is how pressed I feel, Harry must feel ten times worse! He thought.

Tuesday Morning DADA class for third years (3rd week in October)...

The morning's DADA class went reasonably well. The students were learning about magical creatures and spent part of their time dealing with the class Boggart. What bothered him however was that the class seemed to be shifting the seating arrangement. It was subtle though. Over the past few weeks, some of the students had moved to the back of the class.

It was only today that he realized that they were all muggleborn or halfblood students. After the class, he decided to mention it to Professor Snape.

"Professor? Have you noticed the new seating arrangements in today's class?"

Severus frowned for a moment. "Come to think of it, I did notice that some students had shifted places. But it didn't seem all that significant," he replied.

"Sir, you heard about what happened to Molly Anderson?" Harry asked.

"Yes. I understand she'll be fine Harry," he said, eyeing the young man carefully. Something about Harry's line of questions was starting to bother him.

"Sir, Molly is a muggleborn. All of the students who have moved to the back of the class are muggleborn or halfbloods. Am I just imagining a connection here? Has Mad-Eye finally made me as paranoid as he is? It just seems off to me...odd," Harry said softly.

Severus scowled. "I don't think there is anything to be worried about Harry, but I'll speak with Mrs. Snape tonight and see if she had noticed anything unusual."

"Thank you, Sir."

Warbangers and Sour Grapes...

Serena walked into the infirmary to talk to Poppy. The medi-witch had been using a number of potions lately and Serena needed to make sure she had enough on hand.

She was surprised to see Poppy working on two patients. The Weasley twins, Fred and George, both looked like they had lost a war with sword wielding midgets. Their pants were torn to shreds from the knees down and their legs were covered in hundreds of small cuts.

Serena had taken the opportunity to look up the twin's records and was surprised to discover they had dropped out of school after achieving only three OWLS. Their scores were dreadful, and yet they now

owned a highly successful and innovative joke shop, and were actively developing weapons for Harry. She strongly suspected that they had deliberately thrown their scores while here at school.

Both twins looked up and broke into grins as Serena walked in. Fred was holding a box tight to his chest. Eyeing it curiously, she noticed that the box trembled intermittently.

"What have you two gotten yourselves into this time?" asked Serena.

"We were testing..." started Fred.

"...a new product..." continued George.

"...for speed and endurance," ended Fred.

"Well, judging by your legs, I'd say it's got more speed than either of you," Serena said.

She blinked at the low growl that came from the box that Fred was holding.

Fred waved a hand airily. "It's no big deal..."

"...just a matter of adjusting the mix really," continued George.

"Besides we did catch most of them..." added Fred happily.

"And our interns will catch the rest," finished George.

"Interns? Oh, you mean the students you've hired." Serena's eyes narrowed and she walked to the window to look at the Warbangers building. In the distance, she could make out three students being chased by some sort of low, blue mass that seemed to flow like water over the ground. Through the closed window, she could just make out the faint sound of screaming.

She turned back to the twins and raised an eyebrow. "You're interns are the ones currently being caught, I think. Madam Pomfrey's going to be in for a busy day, it seems. So tell me, what's chasing the kids, and will it require Auror intervention?" she asked dryly.

George pulled out a glass vial and handed it to her. Inside was, well, she couldn't tell what it was. It was round, about the size of a marble, dark, angry purple in color, and it blinked two tiny eyes at her. When she tilted the vial to get a better look at it, the thing inside bared small, sharp teeth and kicked the side of the glass with a tiny foot.

"We call them..." started George.

"...The Grapes of Wrath," finished Fred.

Looking at their shining, happy faces, bloody, tattered clothing and oozing wounds, she almost pitied Voldemort having to face these two. With that thought, Serena sat on an empty bed and started to laugh.

The twins gaped at her. A Professor, laughing at something they'd done? Lectures, they were used to. Yelling, they'd come to expect. But laughter?

George leaned over to Fred and whispered, "Has she gone mental, then?"

"Well, she did marry Snape," Fred said wisely.

"That would explain the twisted sense of humor, wouldn't it?" George asked.

Serena bent over, holding her sides as tears streamed down her face.

Hogwarts Infirmary, Wednesday afternoon...

The infirmary was empty today. Madam Pomfrey was working on her inventory notes when Professor McGonagall stepped into her office.

"Minerva! How nice for you to visit. Please tell me you haven't escorted another injured student here for me?" said Madam Pomfrey.

McGonagall smiled. "No Poppy, not today. However we have had a floo call from Hogsmeade. It seems that Rosemerta's niece Cindy is in labor and no one can find Healer Aberson. They have asked if you could come assist?"

Madam Pomfrey looked around at the empty beds. It had been so long since she had helped with a birthing. They were such special occasions, so happy!

"Let me get my cloak and bag Minerva, and I'll leave straight away," said Poppy.

"If you don't mind Poppy, I think I'll come with you. If I know Rosemerta, she'll be wearing a hole in the floor with her pacing. I'll be able to keep her calm. Besides, Albus will be back shortly from that conference and I'm done with classes for the day."

"Thank you, Minerva. I would be happy for the company," replied Poppy.

Donning her cloak and checking her bag, the two women left the infirmary and headed to the Entrance Hall.

The Ministry Conference...

It had been a long, boring conference, sitting around listening to possible approaches to improving the potion that Serena and Severus had invented. Ministry healers were hoping to find something that was capable of providing at least a four-hour protection time, and perhaps also incorporate the Crucio restorative features into it as well.

While it was a worthwhile endeavor, Ministry potion developers seemed to be the most boring of speakers. It was with no small sigh of relief that Albus, Serena and Severus finally left the room after a long day.

The three conversed with Kingsley Shacklebolt for a moment. Kingsley, as head of the Aurors, had a keen interest in seeing the potion improved. With a parting wave, the three teachers entered the queue for the waiting floo.

Dumbledore knew immediately that something was wrong when he stepped into the floo. The movement was jerky, not smooth. Reaching for his wand, he cast a shield as he stepped from the floo.

Barely a minute later, both Severus and Serena stepped out of the floo. They were shocked to find themselves in a room with no apparent exits other than the fireplace they'd just stepped out of. Albus was bending over a bound Death Eater, removing his wand. There were four other Death Eaters bound. Severus immediately went to help.

Serena opened a small pouch at her belt and tossed a pinch of floo powder into the fireplace. Nothing happened.

"Albus, where are we?" she asked.

"It appears Serena, we have been intercepted while in transit. As to where we are, that is hard to say. These five," he gestured at the Death Eaters, "were lying in wait when I came through. Since the floo doesn't work, we may have to wait until these revive enough to find out how they expected to leave this place," he replied.

Serena nodded and started checking the walls for illusions, or other spells which might hide an exit.

Meeting of the Phoenix Brigade...

Harry was uneasy. His locket had thumped against him several times today and he still couldn't see a reason for it. The Brigade was busy working on coordination drills. He had walked the floor several times, but there really wasn't much for him to do. Jack and Ron had them well in hand.

Finally, he turned to Ginny. "Keep them working for another ten minutes, then let them go, Gin. I think I'll head up to the common room early tonight."

Ginny looked at him with concern. "Are you ok, Harry?"

"I don't know. I just had this feeling that something's happening. Something bad. I wanted to watch those new grenadier squads, but I think we should be up in the common room tonight. You saw how few teachers were at dinner."

"All right. Wait a moment though. I'll tell Hermione and join you." Ginny dashed off to speak with Hermione who glanced at Harry with worry.

Somewhere in England, Location unknown...

"Report," snarled Voldemort.

"Master, the floo trap has been triggered," said the bowing Death Eater.

"Finally!" he snapped.

The link had been available to him for nearly six days now and he had held back. With everything in place, now was the time to strike!

The common room...

The two left the Room of Requirement and headed for the common room. Upon entering, they were shocked to see a group of fifth year students had cornered a bunch of first year students. Wan Chang was screaming at them.

"STUPID MUDBLOODS! YOU WILL DO WHAT I TELL YOU TO DO!"

Harry scowled, seeing Eric and Erika were in the center of the group, clutching each other in fear.

"Chang," Harry said, walking towards the group, "that's one month detention with Mr. Filch. Say another word and it will be a year."

Wan whirled on Harry. "You'll get yours Potter! You can't protect yourself, let alone these filthy mudbloods!"

"That'll be a year's detention, Miss, Chang. Would you care to go for two?" Harry asked calmly.

With a murderous look, Wan turned towards the dorms, her friends following. The sounds of their vicious laughter drifting back towards Harry. Ginny moved around between the first years, trying to calm them. Most relaxed as soon as Harry and Ginny appeared.

Ginny was talking to a young girl when she felt someone grip her leg tightly. She looked down to see Eric clutching at her.

"What's wrong with Professor Harry?" he whispered, his eyes full of fear.

Ginny whipped her head around to see Harry clutching at his scar and staggering drunkenly around the common room. She paled as Harry reared backwards, screaming, and collapsed, landing on one of the small coffee tables. He writhed in agony and slowly slid off the table onto the floor. Ginny broke from her stasis and sprinted over to him.

He had his hands plastered to his forehead and blood trickled from underneath them. Only the whites of his eyes were visible and his body was wracked by spasms.

Eric and Erika had followed Ginny and now clung to each other, terrified at what they were seeing.

The doors to the common room burst open as Brigade member's poured in. Hearing Harry's screams, they drew their wands.

Ginny looked up as Ron and Hermione rushed over. She was struggling to keep Harry still.

"Ron help me! Hermione, his salve! It's on his nightstand."

Neville and Luna stepped up to help Ron with Harry, his screams now bringing down some of the students from their dorm rooms.

Wan, standing at one bottom of one of the stairways, barked a laugh and said, "Filthy halfblood! I knew he'd get his!" Her voice carried over Harry's screams of agony.

Ron looked up from holding Harry's shoulders down. He spotted Blaise and ordered him to clear the room of all but Brigade members.

As the security team moved out, Blaise grabbed Wan roughly. Over her shrieks and protests, he forced her from the room none to gently.

Hermione came rushing down from the boy's dorm and handed Ginny the pot of salve. She reached in and put a small amount on Harry's scar, but he continued to writhe and thrash around. The salve had no effect! Ginny looked at her fingers and gasped. Her fingers hadn't changed color. Always before they turned green!

"Mione! Something's wrong with the salve! It didn't change the color of my fingers!" she gasped, holding them up for her friend to see.

Hermione looked stricken. "Does he have any more?"

"Yes! There should be two extra pots in his trunk. Hurry!"

Neville and Luna were casting pain-relieving charms on Harry. It was all they could think to do. But the charms, which should have lasted an hour, were burning out almost immediately. At the strained looks on their faces, Ron asked what was happening.

"Too much pain," Neville muttered, casting once again. "The pain is burning through them too fast, Ron!"

"Keep going, Nev," Luna said softly, her eyes focused for once. "It's all we can do. If it gives him any relief, we can't stop."

"Slatterly," Neville snapped at a young man standing near an exit. "Get over here and help us. Grab any of the other squad healers you see. We'll trade off, round robin style, until the salve takes hold."

Hermione came back down carrying the two pots of salve, but she didn't hand them to Ginny. Ginny looked up at her questioningly.

"They don't make my fingers change colors either, Ginny."

"Ron," Luna said quietly, "we need help. We can keep casting until we exhaust ourselves, but the pain could kill him."

Ron didn't need to say anything. Twenty members of the Brigade sprinted from the room in search of a teacher, Professor Dumbledore, Madam Pomfrey, someone!

Ginny rocked back on her heels and looked down at her man. His pain was unbearable and there was nothing she could do to stop it. Hermione knelt besides her, putting the two pots of useless salve on the table.

As Ginny started to sob, she felt Hermione's arms wrap around her. There was nothing they could do.

Colin Creevey in the Kitchen...

Colin raced from the common room with the rest of the students. Like Harry, he had noticed how few teachers were at dinner and decided to check the kitchen in case someone was picking up a late night meal.

He burst into the room, startling some of the house elves.

Dobby came forward. "Is there something we can do for you, young master?"

"Dobby! I've got to find a teacher or Professor Dumbledore! Harry's in trouble in the common room!" Colin cried breathlessly.

"Harry? Harry Potter in trouble? Dobby find Professor Dumbledore!" With that, the small, loyal elf winked out of sight.

Colin leaned against a table, breathing heavily.

Headmaster's office, Hogwarts...

Dobby appeared with a loud Pop, and looked about the room wildly. "PROFESSOR DUMBLEDORE!
WHERE IS YOU?" he cried.

Dobby could see the room was empty. He started to think of where next to check when he spotted Fawkes, who trilled softly to him.

Dobby blinked as a voice popped into his head unbidden.

What troubles you, gentle elf?

"Fawkes? Is you talking to Dobby?" the elf asked.

Indeed little elf. Now tell me, what troubles you? I sense a great urgency about you tonight.

"Fawkes.. We needs Professor Dumbledore. Harry Potter is in great trouble in the common room, but I does not know were to be finding the Professor," Dobby cried.

The Fledgling is in trouble? Let us go see for ourselves, little elf. Grasp onto one of my tail feathers and we shall go.

Dobby grabbed a tail feather as Fawkes glided over him. They left the office in a flash.

The common room...

The students had managed to find a few teachers. Professor Flitwick was there and Professor Sprout, who spoke of sending Harry to St. Mungos.

There was a bright flash of light and suddenly Fawkes and Dobby appeared. Dobby rushed over to Harry, his tennis ball sized eyes grew wider and great drops of tears slid down his cheeks.

Harry lay barely breathing. His energy spent from convulsing, he had finally fallen silent. His muscles continued to spasm and it was clear that his strength was waning.

Little Elf, tell them I will bring Albus. The Fledgling is in great danger. The Dark Lord attacks him.

Fawkes flew over Harry a few times and then burst into flame, vanishing from the room.

"Miz Wheezy... Miz Wheezy! Fawkes says he is getting Professor Dumbledore, he will bring him!" cried Dobby

Ginny looked to Hermione, whose face mirrored her own expression of hope. If anyone could find Dumbledore, his familiar could!

In the Floo trap...

Dumbledore, Severus and Serena were sitting, slumped against the wall. The five bound Death Eaters were still face down where Albus had left them. None had revived as yet.

When Dumbledore felt a familiar tingle along his spine, he stood up.

"I do believe help is arriving. Shall we leave this place?" he asked, offering a hand to Serena.

For a moment the other two Professors looked at him like he had finally lost his last marble, but then gasped at the bright flash of flame that filled the room.

Fawkes circled above their heads, his song agitated and upset. Dumbledore glanced sharply at the phoenix.

"Come, there is no time to lose," Dumbledore said briskly. "Something is wrong at the school!"

Severus looked at the five Death Eaters. "But Headmaster, what about them?" he asked.

Dumbledore's voice hardened. "Leave them," he replied.

Linking hands, the Professors waited as Dumbledore grasped a tail feather. In a flash, they were gone, leaving behind five Death Eaters who would probably starve to death unless someone came to get them.

The common room...

Ginny couldn't bear to watch Harry any longer. Instead, she scanned the room hopefully, waiting for Fawkes to return.

There was a bright flash of flame and Fawkes reappeared, bringing Dumbledore, Serena and Severus Snape.

"PROFESSORS! THE GREAT HARRY POTTER NEEDS YOUS!" cried Dobby.

"Professors!" Ginny gasped. "It's Harry, the salving isn't working!"

Serena stepped forward and grabbed one of pots on the table. She lifted the lid and sniffed the contents carefully.

"Headmaster, this salve has been tampered with. Severus!" she yelled, turning to her husband. But Severus was already running for the nearest Slytherin exit, which would put him in the dungeons and closer to their private potion lab where the main supply of salve was kept.

"Where is Madam Pomfrey?" Dumbledore asked Professor Flitwick.

"She and Minerva left to respond to an emergency birthing call from Hogsmeade," piped the little Professor.

Dumbledore nodded and waved that aside. Fawkes continued to glide over the students, but his song changed once again. It was soothing and calming to all listening.

It was only a minute or two later that Severus returned to the common room with a much larger pot of salve. Serena grabbed it from him and sniffed the contents again. She then scooped up a small amount of the salve and rubbed it onto Harry's scar.

The effect was immediate. His muscles relaxed, but his breathing was very shallow, and his heartbeat weak. The assault had ended and Harry was unconscious.

Somewhere in England, Location unknown...

Voldemort flew into a rage. He pounded the arm of his chair and killed three servants with killing curses before regaining control. He had been so close! Just another hour or two and that Potter would have been dead, or insane! Unexpectedly, the link had been closed. That meant someone had gotten Potter untainted salve!

He summoned a servant who was forced to step over the body of another.

"Go to the floo trap room. If those five servants are still alive and Dumbledore isn't there, kill them!" he hissed.

The Death Eater bowed low and backed at, "As you command, Master!"

Voldemort seethed. He knew it was his last chance to attack Potter that way. Trying to deny him the salve again would be too difficult. Potter and his friends would be much more careful now.

With glowing, vicious eyes, the Dark Lord stared across the room at one of his servants. Feeling his master's eyes, the man bowed low. It had been his plan, and it had nearly worked. But nearly wasn't good enough.

Voldemort waved the trembling Death Eater to approach him.

"You will continue to work with your subject, servant. But I am most displeased by this." Voldemort said softly. Raising a bony hand, he pointed his wand and the man's chest and murmured almost lovingly, "Crucio."

As the man fell, screaming, the Master smiled. Yes, let him taste his failure, he thought.

Back in the common room...

Serena started examining Harry. "How long has this attack been going on?" she asked Ginny, not looking up.

"Almost an hour, Professor," came Ginny's whispered reply.

"Serena, how is he?" asked Dumbledore.

"I'm not a healer, Headmaster, but he's extremely weak at this point. I don't think he should be moved just yet."

"Then let us at least make him comfortable," replied Dumbledore.

He moved the furniture out of the way and conjured a bed, then levitated Harry onto it. Ginny immediately moved to his side.

Serena looked to Neville and Luna, "Are you two strong enough to run to the infirmary? I know how exhausted you are. And don't lie to me," she said crisply. "One patient is enough. I don't need you two collapsing out of loyalty!"

"We can do it, Professor," Luna said firmly.

"Good. Get me as many strengthening potions as you can find. Oh, and see if Madam Pomfrey has any cardiac strengthener as well."

As the two turned and left the room, Severus handed one of Harry's salve pots to the Headmaster. "The salve has had a neutralizing agent added to it. It wouldn't take much to render the mixture ineffective."

Dumbledore nodded at that. "Yes Severus, another mystery for us to ponder. Right now however, I am concerned for young Harry and our missing healer. Mister Weasley?"

Ron looked up at his name being called. "Sir?"

"I understand your Brigade is fond of running. Do you think we may prevail upon some of them to see if they can find Madam Pomfrey in Hogsmeade?"

Ron nodded and went to issue the orders to Brigade squad members.

Serena was forced to administer the potions via syringe, which meant they would not be as potent as the regular oral method. Blaise was talking intently with Severus about the tampering. Dumbledore conjured a chair for himself and sat near the bed while everyone waited for Madam Pomfrey to return. Fawkes came to a landing on the back of his chair.

At a small noise near his shoulder, the Headmaster turned to find Erika and Eric. They stared at Harry, lying motionless on the bed. Both looked like they had been crying.

Erika tore her eyes away from the still form and looked at Dumbledore. "Sir? Will Professor Harry be alright?" she asked in a small voice.

At the sound of his sister's voice, Eric turned to look at the Headmaster. The fright and other emotions they were experiencing were showing up in their metamorph abilities as their hair cycled violently through colors. The twins were unconsciously fighting each other for control. They hadn't mastered voluntary control, but the last month or so with Tonks had awakened their abilities considerably.

Dumbledore smiled gently at the two. "Yes child, I think Professor Harry will indeed be alright. So long as he has friends like you two, how could he not be?"

Erika nodded and smiled at Dumbledore, as if to say, 'Of course we're his friends, without us he'd be nothing!' Eric flashed a small smile before ducking behind his sister.

Hermione stepped up behind the twins, touching each on the shoulder. "Now that you know Professor Harry will be all right, I think it's time for you both to go to bed," she said, smiling at them.

The twins nodded and allowed Hermione to lead them back up to their dorms.

A few minutes later, a door opened and Madam Pomfrey stepped in, followed by Professor McGonagall and several Brigade members.

Poppy rushed over to Harry and started running diagnostic spells on him. She then switched to healing spells. Her wand flashed and hummed for a several more minutes before she stepped back and looked at Dumbledore.

"Well, Poppy?" he asked.

"He will recover, Headmaster, although I daresay by tomorrow every bone and muscle in his body will be aching. The damage is mostly along the same lines as a Cruciatus Curse, but not quite the same."

Dumbledore nodded absently. "We must make plans to see his supply of the salve remains secure. I would install him in the faculty quarters, but I suspect he would not allow that. Severus can you supply him with a small pot of the salve that will see him through the next few days?"

Professor Snape pulled a much smaller pot out of his robe pocket, "I thought you might want this, Headmaster. There is enough in here for at least five days."

Dumbledore looked at the pot for a moment, then stood and placed it in Harry's hand. He pulled out his wand and muttered an incantation. Then he levitated the pot to the table.

"There, that particular pot is keyed to Harry and Dobby alone. Anyone else touching it will be rendered unconscious. That will do for a temporary solution until we can come up with a more permanent one. Madam Pomfrey, do you wish him moved to the infirmary?"

Poppy Pomfrey harrumphed a few times before replying, "Headmaster, you know as well as I do that he'll only be arguing with me for an early release first thing in the morning. So let's put him in his own bed and make him visit me when he wakes tomorrow. He probably should be excused from classes tomorrow, as well."

Dumbledore nodded. "As you wish Madam Pomfrey. I trust his friends will be happy to see him to his bed. Dobby, will you take his salve up?"

Dobby nodded and grabbed the pot from the table. He'd guard it with his life. Anything for the Great Harry Potter!

When the house elf disappeared, Serena pulled two clean syringes from Poppy's bag. "Do you mind?" she asked the medi-witch, holding them up.

"Of course not," Poppy said, a bit puzzled.

As Serena bent down to the young man on the bed, Dumbledore held up a hand protectively. "What are you doing, Serena?"

"I'll not take a chance with the remaining salve, Headmaster," the Potion Mistress said, sliding one needle into Harry's arm and extracting a small amount of blood. "With these, I can create more salve in little time if the need arises."

Setting aside the untainted blood sample, she picked up the second syringe and repeated the process, extracting blood directly from Harry's scar.

Straightening, she set the second syringe next to the first and cast a magnifying charm on both. As the image appeared above the samples, she nodded to herself as the color variation appeared. With a flick of her wand, she increased the magnification, checking the cell membranes in each sample.

"Severus?" she asked quietly.

"They look correct, Serena," her husband replied, squinting at the image.

With a nod and a murmured "Finite Incantatem", the image vanished. Gathering the samples, she turned to Dumbledore. "I have enough in these samples to keep Harry in salve for years, Sir."

Before he could reply, Ginny interrupted. "Headmaster, may I have a word with you in private please?"

"Of course, my dear. Come sit by me."

Once Ginny had sat down, Dumbledore cast a silencing charm around them.

"You may speak now Ginevra. No one else will hear us."

"Headmaster, before the attack began, Harry stopped a group of fifth year students who were teasing and scaring some first year muggleborn and halfbloods. When Harry gave Wan Chang one month's detention, she laughed and said that Harry couldn't protect himself let alone first year students. As a result, he ended up giving her a full years detention. I didn't think anything of her comment at the time, but it might be important in light of what happened here," she said.

"That is most interesting, Miss Weasley. But tell me, now that you've had time to think about it, how does it make you feel?" he asked her gently.

"To be honest, Sir, it makes me very angry. But I know if there is anything to this, you'll find it and take care of it."

"And you didn't feel the urge to strike back at her, Miss Weasley?" he asked.

"Yes Sir, I did," she replied defiantly. "But I knew there was no proof other than some words. Besides, this is something for you to handle, not I, as much as I would like to."

He nodded approvingly. "Excellent, Miss Weasley. These past few weeks of legilimency lessons do seem to be helping. You've recognized the anger and channeled it into the correct course of action...informing me. You may rest assured my dear, I will put this information to good use. Now, if you will do me the favor of asking Mr. Zabini to join me? He seems to have all the talents of an investigative Auror. I think I can use that to both our advantage."

Ginny nodded, and then stood up to get Blaise.

When Blaise joined Dumbledore in the charmed space, Ginny and Dobby supervised moving Harry up to his bed.

Hogwarts, the next morning...

The Hungarian Horntail snapped and roared at Harry.

"**ACCIO BROOM!**" he shouted.

In the distance he could hear his broom zooming down from the castle. In a moment it was hovering next to him. He grabbed it by the handle and it transformed itself into a sword!

Harry blinked in surprise. He blinked again, only to discover he was in his bed. From the position of the sun it was mid morning, maybe later. Mid Morning? He sat up. That was enough to cause every muscle in his body to scream. He groaned and pulled himself tight against the pain.

"Awake are we? And in pain I see. Well we'll fix that up," said Madam Pomfrey.

"Madam Pomfrey?" He looked around, confused. This was his dorm room, not the infirmary!

"I told the Headmaster that you should see me when you woke up. When you didn't show up at breakfast, I thought you might be sleeping still, so I figured I'd come and check up on you. Now, drink this potion. It will relieve most of the pain. Then you are to rest for the remainder of the day. No classes, young man! You can go to the Great Hall for lunch, or have Dobby get you something to eat. I've left you several potions with Dobby, he or Miss Weasley will see that you drink them," she threatened sternly.

"Thank you, Madam Pomfrey," he replied, the potion already taking effect.

"Mr. Potter, did you know about your salve and just didn't tell anyone?" she asked.

"My salve? Something was wrong with it?"

She smiled at him warmly. "The Headmaster will fill you in on all the details. In the meantime, I want you to stay in this bed for another 30 minutes before you leave it. Do you understand me?"

Dobby appeared with a loud pop. "Harry Potter is feeling better?" he asked, wide eyed.

Poppy smiled at the little elf. "Yes, he's better. Just remember to make sure he takes his potions."

Dobby nodded eagerly. Anything to help the great Harry Potter!

The Great Hall...

The trip to the Great Hall reminded Harry a lot like his recovery from Vernon's attack last year. By the time he arrived from the common room, he was tired and light headed. It didn't help that Dobby was following him, just a pace or two behind, watching his every move.

Harry was early for lunch, but since the Great Hall was often used as a study hall, he wasn't alone. He went to his table and sat down carefully. When the dizziness passed, he started working on his potions homework.

A soft noise behind him caused him to turn slowly. Spotting Erika and Eric, he smiled tiredly.

"Are you ok, Professor Harry?" asked Erika.

Eric it seems had spotted Dobby and his attention was riveted entirely on the little elf. Dobby, for his part, seemed to think Eric was interesting as well.

"I'm fine, Erika. I'll be back in class tomorrow, good as new," replied Harry. "Would you like to sit with me? I'm just going over my potions homework."

Erika nodded eagerly and dragged the unseeing Eric to a seat. He didn't want to take his eyes off Dobby.

"Eric, this is Dobby. He's an elf, and my friend, and he won't hurt you. Dobby, if you like, you can sit next to Eric."

Dobby looked nervous but he slipped into the chair next to the boy. When Erika saw that Harry was really working on his homework, she pulled out her transfiguration notes and a goblet. She then proceeded to try to turn it into a water glass.

Eric and Dobby kept exchanging looks. Finally Eric reached out with one finger and touched Dobby's ear. Dobby looked startled and frightened for a moment, then Eric started to giggle. Dobby smiled shyly at the boy.

"I'm Eric," he said to the elf.

"I'm Dobby, young master," replied Dobby.

"Do you play Wizard's chess?" asked Eric.

Harry rolled his eyes as Eric and Dobby got into a discussion of Wizard's Chess Vs. Elf Chess.

A few minutes later, people started to enter the Great Hall as classes let out. Some seemed surprised to see a House Elf sitting at the table with Harry and two first year students.

Jack Parsons was the next one to join Harry at the table. He seemed delighted to see Dobby.

"Hiya, short stuff! I haven't seen you in a while," he said to the elf.

Dobby looked up shyly at the Professor. Like Harry, Jack had no preconceived notions about how elves are supposed to be treated, so he treated him like he would another person.

"Dobby is busy helping Harry Potter, Professor," said the little elf, proudly.

"Well you take good care of him, Dobby. Make sure he eats his wheaties!" said Jack.

Harry winced. He wasn't sure what "wheaties" were, but Dobby would find out now, even if it killed him.

Jack turned to Harry, his look serious. "I'm glad to see you're feeling better, Harry, although you do look a little green about the gills, if you ask me. Dumbledore tells me you should be back in form by tomorrow."

"That's right, Professor. I'm supposed to take it easy today, but I can return to class tomorrow."

"That's great, Harry!" replied Jack.

As more classes let out, a steady stream of girls began coming up to Harry and wishing him a speedy recovery. When Ron and Hermione joined the table, Ron looking at him with envy, while Hermione smirking at his obvious discomfort.

Serena Snape and Ginny were the last to join them. Ginny gave him a short hug before taking her seat. The hall filled up quickly after that.

Looking around the table, it suddenly struck Harry. Here he was, sitting at a table with multiple muggleborns, a squib, a house elf, himself a half blood, and only two full bloods. He grimaced.

He looked the hall, noted the seating arrangements and scowled. Serena and Jack, seeing his expression, glanced around in concern.

Ginny touched him on the arm. "Harry? Is something wrong? Why are you scowling?"

When he nodded towards the twins and waved everyone else closer, the other occupants leaned towards him. "Look at the other tables and think in terms of blood or ability," he whispered quietly.

Ginny, Serena, Hermione and Jack looked around. Ron was too busy stuffing his face. Hermione caught on first. All of the tables containing muggleborn, half bloods and their full-blooded friends were clustered around Harry's table. Several tables of Brigade members formed the outer ring. The remaining tables were filled with pure bloods, but only a few at those tables seemed openly hostile.

Jack was still confused. "Harry, I don't get it. What are you seeing?" he asked.

"Jack, think defensively for a moment. All of the muggleborn and half bloods are sitting close by, with the brigade forming a protective shield around them. The full bloods are, for the most part, at their own tables. Only a few tables seem to contain troublemakers though. The school is dividing along blood lines," he replied. "It's worse than when we were divided into houses," he finished quietly, grimacing.

"I think I'll bring this up with the Headmaster, Harry," said Serena.

Harry nodded as he watched Wan Chang leave the Great Hall. His eyes narrowed as he noted the faint shimmer of someone using a Brigade camouflage charm following her out. He shot a glance at Hermione who nodded back to him. He turned his attention back to Serena.

He then remembered his potions homework. He handed her the scroll with the essay. "I'm sorry I missed class, Professor. I didn't even wake up until just before noon," he said.

"That's alright, Harry. None of us expected you to make class today." she replied, unrolling the scroll and scanning it quickly. It seemed to be correct, but she'd need to read it completely before she was sure. She smiled when she reached the bottom of the scroll.

"Harry, it's not necessary to place artwork on your homework, you know," she said with a chuckle. "But it's quite good and I do appreciate it."

Harry looked startled. "Artwork, Professor?"

Serena held up the scroll, showing him the bottom of the parchment. In the empty area he had drawn a perfect rendition of the sword of Godric Gryffindor.

He sat there, stunned. He didn't remember drawing that!

Wan and her friends...

Wan Chang sat with a group of her friends in one corner of the common room. They talked in hushed tones.

"I've spoken with my friend via owl. He tells me that the Minister is placing more pro-muggle types into high positions of power, like that muggle lover Weasley. It's even rumored that the head of the Aurors is a muggle lover."

The group started to protest, but she hushed them and told them to keep their voices down. Satisfied that she had their attention, she continued.

"Now, my friend deplores the violence that has happened recently both in school and around the country, but he also says that sometimes you need to break a few eggs if you want to get your way. I've told him what some of you were up to..." She glared when a few looked to protest her indiscretion, "In general terms of course. Anyway, he thinks it's a good idea to make sure the muggle born and half bloods know their place. He also asks me to tell you that he'll help in any way he can, but to stay true to our cause."

The group nodded, looking pleased. A short time later, they split up and headed for their dorms.

No one noticed the slight shimmer as it moved away from the wall.

Lemon Drops exposed...

Ginny entered Professor Dumbledore's office. Fawkes greeted her as the Headmaster waved her to a seat.

"Come in, Miss Weasley. Would you care for a lemon drop?" he asked. Ginny politely declined.

Dumbledore sighed in resignation, and then he squared his shoulders. "You've been doing very well with your exercises Miss Weasley," he began. "Now I think its time to try applying them. As you are aware, a true Legilimens is capable of delving into someone's mind to find out secrets that the subject wishes to keep hidden. We'll start with some simple memories I wish for you to quest for. If you can, you will find them all on your own without knowing what exactly what I am giving you."

Ginny pulled out her wand and looked nervously at Dumbledore who nodded at her to begin. She lifted her wand and pointed it at the Headmaster and said "Legilimens."

"Albus!"

The cry came from a distance. He looked up, still crying. Across the field came a taller lad who, spotting Albus, broke into a run.

"Albus, why did you run from the church? Everyone was afraid for you," said the taller lad.

"I-I-I couldn't stay any longer Abe. What will become of us with Mum gone? You go to that school in another month," said Albus.

"The father at church says the Flamel family will take you in until you can join me at Hogwarts, Albus. Don't worry, Mum is watching over us, nothing bad will happen," said Abe.

The image faded from Ginny's mind. She looked up at Dumbledore startled.

"Yes Miss Weasley, that was my brother, Aberforth, and I when we were boys. I allowed you to see that so you could learn that life cares not what age you are. It places burdens and heartaches on us all, no matter

what the age. Your Mr. Potter has more than his share of heartaches, some of which he hides very deep, even from you," he said softly.

"Now let us try again, only this time I will try to keep you from seeing the memory."

Ginny pointed her wand again. "Legilimens," she said strongly.

She felt like she was swimming upriver. His shields were strong, but she had already found a kink she could worm into. As she pushed deeper, she could feel him bring more of the power of his mind to bear on her. She had a very brief flash of memory, so quick she wasn't even sure she saw it at all.

Albus knelt over the bodies of a woman and a small girl. In his hand he held a muggle weapon. A gun? He was weeping. Slowly, he raised the gun to his head...

And then she was pushed out of his mind. She blinked and shuddered from the pain caused by the loss of the link and from the remembered pain from that flash. She looked at the Headmaster, his face echoed her pain and his eyes were wet.

"Professor?" she asked.

"You are getting quite good at this my dear. I did not expect you to be able to achieve that much," he replied gravely.

"Professor? The memory?" she asked.

Dumbledore sighed. He pushed his glasses up and rubbed his nose for a moment before releasing the glasses again.

"That was my wife and my daughter. I found them shortly after Grindelwald killed them," his voice trailing off.

Impulsively she stood, ran to him and gave him a hug. Dumbledore's eyes widened for a moment, then he smiled at her gently and patted her back. When she released him she returned to her seat.

"Now I think I begin to understand some of what Harry sees in you Ginevra. Your heart is large and your capacity for love knows no bounds. You act impulsively on your emotions, but you are also learning which emotions to act upon. Now, let's try for one more memory. This time I will really put up a fight."

Ginny pointed her wand again and cast Legilimens

Ginny really had to struggle. The kinks in his shield much smaller this time. Finally she managed to enter through one.

There was a flash of a memory.

It was the Headmaster's office. Upon the desk lay a bowl of Lemon Drops. A man she didn't know was casting a preserving charm on the bowl. The door opened and in walked a very young Albus Dumbledore.

"You wished to see me, Sir?" he asked.

"Yes Mr. Dumbledore, please be seated. Would you care for a Lemon Drop?"

Suddenly she was forcefully ejected from his mind. Her senses reeled as she tried to comprehend what she had seen. She eyed the Headmaster suspiciously as an idea formed in her head.

"Alas Miss Weasley, I'm afraid you've discovered the real secret behind my lemon drops. Yes, they are hundreds of years old. About five hundred years ago, the Headmaster at the time placed the bowl of them

on this desk. All through the long years of his tenure, not a single drop was taken. He bet the next Headmaster one hundred galleons that he couldn't get rid of them. Each successive Headmaster has made the same bet to the incoming new Headmaster. In five hundred years, not a single lemon drop has been taken. I do believe there is a nice tidy sum of several thousand galleons riding on that bowl now days. I trust you will keep this to yourself, my dear?"

She could only nod mutely in agreement.

Dumbledore sighed and stared at his bowl of candy; undiminished since the day he took the job.

"Perhaps the next Headmaster will have more luck," he said sadly. "With that, I believe we are finished, Miss Weasley. You have done very well today."

Ginny nodded and left Dumbledore's office, leaving him alone with his memories and his lemon drops.

Harry in Training...

Harry continued his training, this year with Dumbledore assisting him. With only two classes to sit, and helping in DADA with Professor Snape, he rarely felt the need for late night training sessions.

He hadn't had much of a chance to train over the summer. As a result, he was surprised to discover that his power increases over the summer had resulted in nearly destroying the Room of Requirement. Dumbledore had been forced to cast powerful rebounding spells on the walls which caused a one to ricochet off, instead of plowing right through.

With the re-growth of his leg, Jack Parsons had taken to teaching Harry the basics of martial arts. He didn't expect him to need to use it, but he wanted Harry to learn how to fall properly, how to roll with a hit. The idea was to teach him how to minimize the damage his own body may take by falling improperly. His first thought was that this might be a good idea, but after a few sessions was convinced Jack was really out to kill him.

But this wasn't the worst by any means. Jack's physical training included endurance training, which Harry came to loathe with a passion. On more than one occasion he threatened to transfigure Jack into a keg of beer and invite the upper classes to a party. Doing fifty pushups was one thing; being told to do three hundred was another matter entirely!

Tomorrow was the first Hogsmeade weekend, and Harry was greatly looking forward to it. But right now he had more important matters on his hands. When he walked into the Room of Requirement, he saw that Jack's twisted little mind had been at work again.

Dumbledore and Professor Snape were present, as well as Jack, and about twenty simulated opponents.

Jack beamed and walked over to him when he entered. "Harry, today we're going to try something different." He pointed to a maze in the center of the room. It was enormous!

"In a few minutes you're going to enter the maze," Jack continued cheerfully. "Your opponents will apparate into the maze before you. Once you enter the maze, your goal will be to reach the exit, relying mostly on stealth, speed or misdirection. You can fight the simulations, but if you make too much noise, you'll draw other opponents to your location. You still on my track, Harry?"

Harry nodded thoughtfully.

"Ok. Now the good Headmaster here has already run the maze once. His time was six and a half minutes. Let's see if you can do better than that, hmm?"

Dumbledore looked at Jack, but said nothing.

Harry nodded. Jack signaled Dumbledore and the simulations popped out of sight. A moment later, Harry squared his shoulders and walked into maze.

Dumbledore turned to Parsons. "Excuse me Professor, but why did you tell him I ran that maze?"

"Always give them a yardstick to measure themselves by, Headmaster, even if you have to make one up," Jack said with a grin.

Dumbledore nodded approvingly. "Quite so."

You are in a twisty maze with all corridors looking alike...

He entered the maze, reviewing the requirements. Speed and stealth would cull out a lot of spells that made noise, even if he cast them without speaking the incantation. He looked at the walls. They appeared to be grown hedges like the maze he had gone through in his third task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament.

He moved further into the maze, cautiously. As he turned down one corridor, he was narrowly missed by a loud cutting hex. He cursed and fired back at the form, blocking his path with a freezing charm. It was one of the few totally silent spells he knew.

Unfortunately, this particular opponent didn't care for being frozen. Instead of sinking into the ground like most simulations, this one turned into a column of light towering above the maze, a beacon for the other opponents!

Jack stood with the other teachers. "Gotcha, Kiddo!" he muttered with a wide grin.

Both Professor Snape and Dumbledore chuckled.

Harry swore and cast a camouflage charm on himself, followed by a silencing charm. If he couldn't fight his way through, maybe he could sneak his way through. Hearing the pounding of feet approaching, he stayed close to a wall and started moving slowly towards the exit.

The column of light gave him an idea. As he navigated the maze he touched a wall here and there, leaving a charm behind. At one point he froze, his back to the wall, as two opponents pounded down his path, just narrowly missing him.

He could see the exit now, it was only ten meters away, and it was guarded by three simulated opponents. He crept forward, moving closer to the exit.

Jack chuckled. "I don't think he's going to make it this time."

Dumbledore had a slight smile on his face. "Indeed, it would appear that way Professor. But if there is one thing I have learned, it is not to underestimate him."

Harry silently released the charms he had placed in the maze.

Jack and the other two teachers gasped as over thirty towering pillars of light erupted from all over the maze. They watched as the three simulations pounded down the corridor of the maze, leaving the exit unguarded.

"Damn! Nice one kid! Really nice! Divert and evade," Jack murmured shaking his head in admiration.

"Do you think so, Professor? I think it's a trifle overdone if you ask me," said Harry as he dispelled his camouflage charm and the silencing charm. He was standing right next to Jack.

Jack jumped nearly four feet into the air. He turned and spun on Harry. "Dang it all Harry, you nearly gave me kittens! I'm gonna have to go change out my shorts now!"

Harry grinned wickedly at him. "Payback for all those times you've thrown me around the room, Professor."

Hogsmeade Weekend, Harry and Ginny...

Harry came down to the common room. Today was the start of a Hogsmeade weekend. It would also be the first time Harry had been back to the town since he gave the speech which resulted in the ousting of the old Minister of Magic.

For the past few days he had been plagued with dreams about the sword of Gryffindor, and he had handed in more than one homework assignment decorated with the sword.

He was determined to put that behind him and spend his time enjoying the company of his fiancée. He had taken extra care dressing today, and while he wasn't wearing his finest dress robes, his muggle clothing was some of the finest casual wear he could buy at Harrods.

He looked up as she came down her staircase wearing a pleasant skirt-blouse combination and a jacket over her shoulder, should it get chilly. She spotted him and hurried over. His clothing today seemed to mold itself to his torso. She wished he didn't always choose dark colors, but she had to admit, he looked damn fine today. Now if only she could figure out something to do about his hair.

He stood and kissed her on the cheek and she smiled warmly at him.

"Well Harry, have you figured out what we're doing today?" she asked.

"I figure we'll make a stop at Honeydukes. I promised Erika and Eric I would pick them up some sugar quills. After that, you have a choice Gin. We can go to the Three Broomsticks or Madam Puddifoots," he said, looking around, embarrassed.

Madam Puddifoots? She thought. He wants to take me to the most romantic spot in Hogsmeade? He knows I would have been happy to go to the Three Broomsticks with him. Madam Puddifoots is supposed to be so romantic.

Ginny looked at him quizzically. "Are you turning into a romantic on me Harry?" she asked him shyly.

He lowered his head a little so it was close to hers. "Would you be upset with me if I was Gin? Besides, can't I treat my girl to something special once in a while?"

"I think I'd like that," she said with a demure look.

"Do you want us to wait for Ron and Hermione? Or should we go on by ourselves?"

He had a hopeful look. Taking a stab, she guessed, replying, "Oh, they can always find us later. Let's push off."

He beamed a big smile at her and she let out a small breath, glad she'd interpreted his wants correctly. He held out his arm and, linking hers through it, they left the common room.

Blaise smiled from under the invisibility cloak he had borrowed from Hermione. He was truly happy for Harry and thought Ginny was a beautiful girl. Harry had given him a chance when no one else outside his house would have. Harry had accepted him, both as a friend and for his talents, Blaise felt he owed Harry and wasn't about to let him down.

His eye's narrowed as his target came down the stairs and headed for the exit. He tucked in behind her and followed.

Hogsmeade, Honeydukes et al...

Harry and Ginny made their way from the castle, passing the outer walls. In the distance they could hear a dull booming coming from the Warbangers building. He chuckled hearing the twins hard at work and placed his arm around Ginny's shoulders.

It was a pleasant walk to town for the both of them. Harry looked carefully, but there was no sign of the terrible battle that had been fought here barely five months earlier. The couple made a beeline for Honeydukes, where Harry picked up several packages of Sugar Quills and two boxes of Bertie Botts Every Flavor Beans. After paying for their items, they left.

"Gin, can we make one more stop before we go to Madam Puddifoots?" he asked.

"Sure, were are we going?" she replied.

"I want to stop at Dervish and Bangs for a moment. I owled them on Monday and I want to see if my items are in," he said.

Curious now, she followed Harry to Dervish and Bangs. Once inside the shop, he moved immediately to the counter.

"Would you please inform Mr. Dervish that Mr. Potter wishes to know if his order has arrived?" he asked.

The clerk behind the counter began to stammer. "O-O-Of course Mr. Potter. If you will wait here, I'll be right back."

The clerk vanished into a back room and a moment later Mr. Dervish himself appeared, carrying two medium sized packages.

"Mr. Potter! What a pleasure it is to finally make your acquaintance. Your orders arrived yesterday. I have inspected them myself, but you might want to take a look. I must say, these are wonderful quality! The best I've seen in a long time," Mr. Dervish exclaimed cheerfully.

When Ginny stepped forward to watch Harry Mr. Dervish scowled at her.

"Oh I'm sorry, Mr. Dervish. This is Ginevra Weasley, my fiancée, and the other person that will be giving these gifts with me."

Dervish's face instantly transformed from a scowl to a broad smile. "Oh, of course! Welcome to my humble shop Miss Weasley."

Ginny smiled at the man, although his change in demeanor made her want to scowl, then turned her attention back to Harry. He had unwrapped both packages and was inspecting the contents. Ginny could see that one was a Wizard's Chess set, hand carved and, if the box were to be believed, made with the finest enchantments and materials. The other box contained a silver Lunarscope.

Harry nodded and pulled out his Gringots card to pay for the purchase. Ginny gasped when she saw him spending over one hundred galleons for two children's toys!

Mr. Dervish quickly rewapped the gifts and handed them to Harry who shrunk them and put them in a pocket. Bidding Mr. Dervish a good day, the couple left the store and made their way to Madam Puddifoots.

The Three Broomsticks...

Wan Chang sat at a corner table alone. She watched the door carefully for someone to enter. Her table was empty and, being it was so early, The Three Broomsticks was still fairly empty with only a few students about.

After a long wait, a tall young man entered. Wan waved and he returned her wave. He went over to the inn keeper and spoke softly with him for a moment. Then, behind his back, he showed a hand with three fingers outstretched.

Wan saw the movement, picked up her things, and headed upstairs. Finding room number three was easy enough. She opened the door and looked in. There was a momentary draft of air but, ignoring it, she stepped inside.

Another minute went by and Danny entered the room, closing the door softly behind him. As he turned, he put on his best smile for her. She really is quite plain, he thought. But the Master has promised me I can have both her and her sister, so I can live with the plain one if it gets me the beautiful one.

Wan flung her arms around him and kissed him deeply. She was already fumbling for his zipper, when he stopped her.

"Later, my pretty. First I want to know, were you caught? I was so worried you might be caught!"

"No darling, no one saw a thing. I waited for the Quidditch match when his room would be empty and snuck in then," she replied, her hands still working on his zipper. "It's been so long! I want you, and I know you must be ready to burst, you poor dear! Let me give you some relief."

"In a moment, my pet. I want to know, how long did it last? Did he suffer, has he fully recovered?" asked Danny.

"He screamed for nearly an hour. It was so funny! I don't know much about how he recovered because he's very secretive about what he can do. Those that know don't talk about it, except to say he's very powerful. Some say even more powerful than that fool Dumbledore," she replied.

"And are you still relaying my messages to your friends?" he asked, his breath deepening as she started to fondle him though his pants.

"Oh yes, Danny. They love hearing from you."

"Good, very good Wan. I'll try to get you more powder. If you have the chance to get to his salve again, take it and owl me. Understand?"

"Yes, yes. I understand," she said through her own gasps as she rubbed herself against his leg.

He sat on the edge of the bed and reached to fondle her breasts through her blouse. She moaned and knelt before him. She quickly opened his zipper and released him from his pants.

He stopped her. "I want you to prove your love to me Wan," he said fiercely.

"I'll do anything for you Danny, anything!" she moaned piteously.

He smiled at her. "Good my pet. I will owl you asking you to bring me a toy for our next meeting here. I think you will enjoy it. Do this for me and I'll have your ring with me next Hogsmeade weekend."

She nodded in acceptance of his demand, then she moaned in delight as he grabbed her head and guided her downwards.

In a single dive she gathered him into her mouth. He gasped and pulled out his wand to cast a darkening charm. Maybe she is worth keeping, he thought. Her mouth is most expert, I doubt Cho will be as good.

The couple was so engrossed in their own passions that they never noticed the door opening and closing.

Just outside of room number three, there was swish of cloth and Blaise Zabini appeared. He visibly trembled with his anger as he folded Hermione's invisibility cloak.

He stopped folding the garment and gasped. On his pinky was the ring given to him by Harry. It wasn't as fancy as his Phoenix ring, but the center stone of this ring was blinking softly. According to Harry, this was a special dark mark detector. Its range was less than fifteen feet. As the ring had never blinked in Wan's presence, that meant Danny was a Death Eater!

Madam Puddifoots...

Madam Puddifoot, to Harry's embarrassment, made a big deal about the young couple and made sure they had the best table in the house. They placed an order for some hot chocolate and a plate of her famous cookies.

Sitting at the table, Ginny couldn't contain her curiosity anymore.

"Harry, who are those gifts for?" she asked.

"Hmmm? Oh, the gifts! I bought them for Erika and Eric. Coming from a muggle life, I thought they'd like real Wizarding gifts for Christmas," he replied.

"You've really fallen for them haven't you? I see the way you treat them. You look out for them, even sneak them sweets from the kitchen now and then," she said with a warm smile.

"Yeah, I guess I do. I can't help but see them and think about how lost they feel. One moment they were muggles, the next they were being told they were a witch and a wizard."

"You know what? I think you're embarrassed to admit that you love two little kids, and kids in general. All of the younger years seem to think you're the greatest teacher they've ever had. I think you have the makings of an excellent father, Harry Potter, and I am going to enjoy helping you become one"

"I hope you're right, but sometimes it scares me too..." his voice trailed off.

Ginny leaned forward and took his hand in hers.

"Tell me what scares you," she said softly.

He looked at her, his eyes filled with a kind of worry she never saw there before. After a moment he began to talk very softly. "In the muggle world, they say that people who have my kind of background, you know, getting... hit... and stuff... when they grow up, they hit their own kids. They call it a cycle of some sort. I don't understand it. But sometimes it scares me that I really will turn out that way."

He tensed and stared down at the table after he finished, almost afraid to look at her.

"Look at me," she demanded gently

When his eyes locked with hers, she said, "Harry, dear heart, I've seen you cry in anguish over the loss of someone else's parents. I've seen you befriend two little kids and give them your love. You've never struck me or anyone you love that I know of. Tell me, can you see yourself hitting Erika?"

"NO! Never Gin, I'd rather die first!" he exclaimed.

"The very fact that it worries you and scares you a little is enough to convince me you will do everything in your power to make sure our children are brought up entirely opposite from how you were brought up. In fact, I think you'll be my biggest problem. I suspect you'll be spoiling them more than my mum will. You're going to be a wonderful father Harry, I can feel it," she finished with a smile.

He smiled at her and took both her hands in his, sending a single thought to her. I love you, Ginny.

She smiled and giggled a little mischievously before sending a thought back to him. I love you too, Harry.

Harry blinked in shock when her words echoed in his mind. Then he smiled back at her. He knew she had been getting some special training from Dumbledore, but she hadn't told him what that training was.

To the outside world they were simply a young couple staring deeply into each other's eyes. No one knew they were carrying on a conversation that had gone beyond the need for words.

Ron and Hermione...

Ron and Hermione left Hogwarts and were heading to the Three Broomsticks when Blaise fell into step next to them.

"We need to talk, someplace secure, now," he hissed at them.

Startled, Hermione suggested the Shrieking Shack. Unlike the locals, Hermione, Ron and Harry knew exactly what its purpose was.

"Isn't that haunted?" asked Blaise in surprise.

"No, that's its cover story Blaise. I'll tell you about it another day. It's the only place around here that I know the locals won't go," replied Hermione

"Ok, let's go then. This is too important to wait," said Blaise, clearly agitated.

The three immediately changed course, heading to the Shrieking Shack. Once inside, Hermione conjured three chairs. She and Ron took a seat while Blaise, ignoring the extra chair, started to pace.

"Blaise, mate, settle down and talk to us," said Ron.

Blaise ran a hand through his hair, before beginning. "All right. I followed Wan Chang from the castle to the Three Broomsticks. There she met a Death Eater named Danny. She never mentioned his last name. He definitely supplied Wan with the neutralizing agent for Harry's salve, and plans on sending her more to repeat the attack. He's also been egging on a group of other students through his communications with her."

Hermione hitched in her breath and Ron looked angry...very angry.

"There's more. He wants her to bring something from Hogwarts for the next Hogsmeade weekend," finished Blaise.

"Ron, Blaise, Harry needs to know about this right away. He and Ginny are somewhere in town. We need to find them," said Hermione

"They aren't in the Three Broomsticks. I was just there," said Blaise.

Ron paled and gasped. The other two turned to look at him curiously. "Y-Y-You don't suppose they went to Madam Puddifoots?"

Hermione looked at Ron in exasperation. Blaise snickered and volunteered to go check for them. She waited for a few minutes to make sure Blaise was well gone before turning back to Ron.

"What's wrong with Madam Puddifoots? I'm told it's quite romantic!" She asked haughtily.

"B-B-But it's all pink inside 'Mione, and they have these cherubs on the walls," replied Ron, knowing he was suddenly on dangerously thin ice.

"Honestly, Ronald! I swear you don't have a single romantic bone in your body!" she snapped at him with a glare.

Ron put head in his hands. If Harry took Ginny to Puddifoots, he thought, I'll have no choice but to take 'Mione. Oh Merlin Harry, how could you do this to me? It's BLOODY PINK with BLOODY PINK CHERUBS!

Hits and Misses...

After a half hour wait, Blaise returned with Harry and Ginny following. Hermione conjured additional chairs.

"I found them in Madam Puddifoots," Blaise said with a smirking grin. Ron groaned and buried his head in his hands again.

Hermione shot him a withering look, then turned to Harry.

"Harry, Blaise has something he needs to tell you."

Harry turned to Blaise and listened as he repeated his story. Ginny reached out and placed a hand on Harry's knee. She could see his anger and feel his magic swelling immensely.

"Blaise, round up any Brigade members you can find and check the room. If both of them are still there, capture them alive and bring them here. I need both of them, Blaise. Wan's useless without her Death Eater boyfriend," said Harry in a steely voice.

Blaise stiffened almost to a position of attention, nodded curtly, then left the shack at a run. Harry was about to get up and start pacing when Ginny moved her hand to his arm. He turned to look at her, his eyes blazing with power.

"Harry," she said softly, "let Blaise do his job. Your pacing or blowing up Hogsmeade will accomplish nothing."

Her words took a long minute to sink in. He closed his eyes and focused on his calming phoenix song. A moment later he opened his eyes and looked at her, a thousand sparkles danced in his gaze.

"Your right, love," he replied.

An hour later, Blaise returned to the Shrieking Shack. His shoulders were slumped.

"Harry, I'm sorry. We missed him. He left before we could get enough people assembled. I'm sorry I failed you, mate."

Harry stood and walked over to him. Placing both hands on his shoulders, he looked him squarely in the eye. "Blaise, you didn't fail, you just had a spot of bad luck. Since we know they plan to meet on the next Hogsmeade weekend, I want you to put together a plan so we can take them both down with a minimum of fuss. You did real good Blaise, you alerted us to the danger."

Blaise squared his shoulders. "I'll give it my best, mate."

"You're a good man Blaise, don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

Blaise nodded and smiled.

Harry looked up as Susan Bones entered the room. "Harry," she asked, "what's going on? I saw Blaise come in here..." her voice trailed off as she spotted Blaise and she blushed prettily.

Blaise looked stunned, staring at Susan. Then he shot her a questioning look. She smiled back at him.

"Nothing's going on now Susan, but we'll have a little fun next Hogsmeade weekend I think. In the meantime, I intend to take my fiancée back to Madam Puddifoots. How about you all join me, my treat?" he asked with a sly grin.

Ron was about to protest when Hermione stomped on his foot. "BLOODY HELL woman! That hurt!"

Hermione touched his cheek absently, "Hush Ron," she said before turning back to Harry. "We'd love to go," she said sweetly.

Blaise shot another questioning look at Susan who blushed and nodded demurely. He looked like a man about to touch a live snake for the first time when he reached out slowly and took her hand in his.

Susan gave a small smile of triumph as Blaise looked at Harry saying, "We'd be honored to join you, Harry."

Harry bowed to Ginny and took her hand. "Shall we go then Miss Weasley?"

Ginny laughed and mussed his hair before saying, "But of course, Mr. Potter."

Monday night with Tonks...

Tonks was working with the Stonesmith twins again. Professor McGonagall had gone to deliver some papers to Professor Dumbledore, but would return before the session was over.

Tonks had brought in a couple of surprises for them and she had something special she wanted to try.

The twins watched her curiously as she pulled out two small mirrors and expanded them so they were each about four feet high. Then she leaned the mirrors against the wall and positioned each twin in front of a mirror.

Next to each mirror, she placed a pile of chocolate frog packages. Both twins eyes shone with delight seeing the sweets.

"Erika, Eric, you have both been doing wonderfully for me, but I'd like to try something different tonight. If you can do it, you'll each get a chocolate frog," said Tonks.

The two first years eyed her warily in the mirror, then nodded.

"Eric, I'd like you to change your hair until it's the same color as Professor Harry's. Erika, I'd like you to make your hair red, like Ginny's."

Erika spun around to face her. "But we're twins! We're supposed to be the same!" she said hotly.

Eric looked at the pile of chocolate frogs longingly. "I'd like try," he said quietly.

Erika turned around to stare at her brother in shock. "B-B-But the chocolate frogs, Erika!" he said in protest at her glare.

Tonks placed a hand on both of their shoulders. "Would you try Erika, for me?" she said with a sad smile and in a soft voice.

Erika looked torn. She also wanted a frog, but this just... oh very well.

"Oh alright, we'll try," she replied.

Both children turned to the mirror and screwed up their faces in concentration. A few seconds later, Eric had black unruly hair like Harry. Erika was having a harder time of it, but a minute later she had bright red hair like Ginny.

Tonks laughed happily for the two and hugged them both. She then gave them each a chocolate frog to munch on while they rested for a bit.

When Tonks felt a hand on her shoulder, she turned to find that Professor McGonagall had returned. Minerva looked down at the Auror and gave her a smile and winked.

"Well done, children!" said McGonagall.

Tonks recaptured their attention. "Now, I want you both to keep the hair color. It will be hard at first, but the more you practice holding the change, the easier it will become for you."

The both nodded. Ten minutes later Erika's hair reverted to normal. A minute later Eric's followed. Both children were clearly tired from the night's session.

McGonagall looked up from her desk and evaluated their condition. "I think that is enough for tonight. Nymphadora, if you would be so kind as to escort Miss Stonesmith to the common room, I wish to speak to her brother for a moment longer."

"I'll be happy to Minerva. I'll take her to her common room, and then I need to speak to Professor Dumbledore. He asked me to provide him with an update on the twins progress," she replied.

Tonks offered Erika her hand. Erika took it with a smile and walked from the room.

Eric looked at Professor McGonagall fearfully.

McGonagall smiled at the small boy. "Please relax, Mr. Stonesmith. I wanted to talk to you about your performance in transfiguration class. You were doing so well until we tried to change the hedgehog into a pin cushion. I'm wondering if you can tell me why that particular transformation gave you so much difficulty?"

Eric looked down at his feet, his voice barely audible. "I just couldn't see the why behind it, Professor. When I grow up will I often have to change hedgehogs into pin cushions? Isn't that mean to the hedgehog?"

McGonagall smiled at the boy. "No, you'll probably never have to change a hedgehog into a pin cushion. The only reason we do it here in school is because we are trying to teach you the concept behind how to

perform such a transformation. You must learn to master the transformation process, which is why we start with simple changes and work to more difficult ones."

Eric thought about that for a moment, and then nodded. "That makes sense Professor. Sometimes it's nice to know the why behind something."

Now that is a quite an understatement Mr. Stonesmith. I suspect you will do quite well as long as you know your 'why', she thought.

"Yes, knowing why is sometimes almost as important as knowing how. I expect you will do better now Mr. Stonesmith. You may return to your common room," she said with a small smile.

Eric picked up his book bag and left the room. He hadn't gone far when he was hit from behind and everything went dark.

The common room...

Harry was sitting with Ginny, Ron and Hermione. Each of them was reading a book, when there came a piercing cry from one of the staircases, and then a short brown blur streaked out of the stairway.

"PROFESSOR HARRY! OW!" screamed Erika, then stumbled and fell to the floor.

Harry dropped his book and ran to the little girl. She was clutching her leg and whimpering in pain. Harry scooped her up and brought her over to the couch.

"OW! Make it stop!" she cried again.

She whimpered and clutched at her other leg. Ginny pushed the little girl's hand away, pulled up her pajama leg and gasped as a nasty bruise formed before her eyes.

"Please, no more..." she whined.

Erika flinched violently several more times, once clutching at her stomach and another time at her ribs.

"Erika, what's happening?" Hermione asked, her eyes filled with concern. Ginny looked ready to cry. She had never heard about a curse like this before.

Erika whimpered and moaned. Harry suddenly reared up straight. "Eric! He's in trouble! Hermione, Ginny, get her to Madam Pomfrey," he shouted as he ran for the door.

Harry knew Eric had a late night session with Professor McGonagall and Tonks, so he felt the best thing was to check the route from the Gryffindor entrance to the common room and Professor McGonagall's office.

He spent about twenty minutes checking several classrooms before he heard a moan come from a small closet. Opening the door, he paled. His magic roared through him and he staggered. He placed a hand against the wall to steady himself. Where he touched, the castle wall flared a bright blue. There was a loud, hollow booming sound as a circle of light spread from his hand. It quickly encompassing the wall he leaned against and raced off through the castle.

He conjured a stretcher and levitated the injured boy onto it gently. With the stretcher following, his eyes blurry with tears, he ran towards the infirmary. With every step, his magical energy increased as his desire to protect the small boy, and those like him, grew stronger.

The Headmaster's Office...

Dumbledore looked up in shock as the wave of light passed through his office and he heard a booming sound. Until a moment ago, he was listening with amusement to Tonks give a report on her work with the Stonesmith twins.

His floo suddenly flared to life and Madam Pomfrey's head appeared in the fireplace.

"Headmaster, we need you in the infirmary! Erika Stonesmith was just brought in looking like she's been badly beaten," she said.

Tonks gasped in anguish. She had left her safe in the common room!

Dumbledore immediately went to the floo, with Tonks close on his heels.

Hogwarts Infirmary...

It was chaos. Ron, Ginny and Hermione were all talking at once and Madam Pomfrey was trying to determine what had happened to Erika.

Tonks rushed over to the little girl's bed, her eyes filled with tears.

"Quiet. Quiet please," said Dumbledore.

When the three settled down, Dumbledore asked, "Now then, Miss Granger. Perhaps you can tell us what happened?"

"Professor, Erika came running into the common room from her dorm. She was crying. It looked like someone was beating her but we couldn't see what was causing it. Harry seemed to think it was Eric who was in trouble," she replied.

"And where is Mr. Potter..."

The doors to the infirmary burst open by themselves. A moment later it looked like the walls were bowing outward and a light approached. Harry came in, glowing from head to toe, a stretcher hovering obediently behind him with a small, still form on it.

Madam Pomfrey gasped as Harry stopped and levitated the broken form onto a bed. She rushed over and began performing her scans.

"Auror Tonks, I need your assistance. Get the camera from the office," Madam Pomfrey said sharply.

As Poppy erected curtains around Eric's bed, Tonks sprinted for the office. When she came back, camera in hand, she ducked behind the curtain.

Madam Pomfrey took as few photos as were absolutely necessary before handing the camera back to Tonks and pushing her from the curtained off area. She turned to survey the boy again, then she started to straighten his limbs and heal the broken bones.

Harry watched silently for a moment before turning towards the exit. The castle started to rumble with a deep powerful sound that was more felt than heard.

Ginny looked at him. "Harry, where are you going?" she asked.

"To find Wan Chang," he replied.

Everybody flinched. It wasn't what he said as much as the tone he used. It was hard as stone and filled with the promise of pain.

Ginny sprinted ahead of Harry and blocked his path, placing both hands on his chest.

"You listen to me Harry. You'll not do this! You're not going off to wreak revenge when you don't even know if she was involved! Are you listening to me? I'm not letting you do this!" she said, steel in her voice.

Harry was staring over her head, but he blinked once, then once again. With a shaky breath, he looked down at her.

"You'd never forgive yourself if you do this Harry. We both know that. And we both know you couldn't live with yourself if you hurt Wan for the wrong reasons. Think with your head! You know this is wrong," Ginny said softly, reaching up to caress his cheek.

Harry's magic suddenly collapsed into itself and his eyes filled with tears. He reached out to her. She pulled him into her embrace where he could cry for two little kids he had come to love.

Ginny looked at the Headmaster and he smiled in approval. Not only does she learn to control her own anger, but she can also help Harry control his, he thought.

Harry regained enough composure that he was able to go stand next to Tonks with Ginny in one arm.

When he placed a hand on her shoulder, the normally happy go lucky Auror leaned against him. Harry could feel that Tonks was trying very hard not to show her emotions.

"Poppy? How is he?" asked Dumbledore.

"He'll be fine, Headmaster. Both of his legs were broken, a few cracked ribs and a nasty blow to the head, but he'll recover. The bones are healing even as we speak. His sister is just bruised. It seems that whatever link exists between the two of them is strong enough to echo injuries, although not as strongly," said Poppy.

"Indeed? That is most interesting, Poppy. I will have to look into that," replied Dumbledore.

Tonks stepped forward, "Headmaster, as an Auror, I must report this. Clearly a crime has been committed against these two."

"Yes, yes, Nymphadora. You must do what you must. We will, of course, cooperate fully with the authorities in this matter," Dumbledore said sadly.

Tonks stepped into Madam Pomfrey's office to place a floo call to the Ministry.

Harry turned to Ron. "Starting tonight, I want every muggle born and half blood and their friends to know that the Brigade is offering them safety. If they come to us, we will assign someone to guard them. I also want two of Blaise's security guarding the infirmary until these two are released."

Dumbledore stared at Harry for a moment. The younger man returned his look defiantly. When Albus raised an eyebrow, Harry had grace enough to look embarrassed.

"Harry," the Headmaster said softly. "It does you credit to show your love for these two. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

That only made Harry more embarrassed, but he felt a little better as Ginny tightened her grip on him.

They all waited while Ministry Aurors came to question them. Auror William Hill personally took Harry's statement, then asked how he was doing. Hill was glad to see Harry had done well with the Weasleys.

Although not strictly a Child Protective Services case, William Hill was one of the best in the Ministry for this sort of investigation.

When Remus finally arrived, Tonks fell into his arms weeping. The emotions she had held in tight control for most of the evening finally let go. He held her tightly and let her cry herself out.

After dealing with questions from the Aurors, Madam Pomfrey pushed everyone out of the infirmary. Tonks and Remus wanted to stay with the children, but Poppy insisted they leave as well. Dumbledore returned to his office and a much subdued Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione returned to the common room.

News of the attack spread throughout the school like wildfire. A vast bulk of the students, full bloods included, seemed to think it was cowardly and were furious that the attackers had not been caught. Everyone suspected it was someone in the student population.

Over the next few days, the Stonesmith twins had a steady stream of visitors, cards and sweets. Ron went up to play Wizard's chess with Eric while Hermione brought their homework and helped them with it. Harry and Ginny visited them very often and even Dobby showed up with a very rare Elf Chess set to teach Eric how to play the multi-dimensional board.

Tonks showed up everyday and it wasn't uncommon for her to sit and watch them while they slept, or to see her holding one of them when they had a nightmare or cried. Eric had nightmares every time he slept, and it was common to see Erika climb into his bed to hold her brother. Remus brought in a Mind Healer and that seemed to help Eric get over some of his problems from the attack. At least the nightmares eased off a little.

Homecoming...

Three days later, when the twins were released from the infirmary, Harry and Ginny escorted them back to the common room with Hermione. There was a marked change in their behavior now. Erika and Eric seemed to need to be in close contact with each other and they were afraid to be left alone. They were alright in the presence of people they knew and trusted, like Harry and Ginny. But if left alone, they huddled together. Eric seemed to retreat further into his shell.

Harry opened the door to the common room and Hermione and Ginny ushered the two twins in. Inside, most of the students waited silently. Word had spread of how fearful they had become, and while people wanted to throw them a party and welcome them back, they didn't want to scare them.

There was a great banner floating over the room welcoming them back. And, hearing of the assault, Fred and George distributed a wide selection of their products, including several hundred of their Bow Wow Bonz chews, which gave anyone eating one long floppy ears like a basset hound. Over three hundred students waited for the twins, their ears already altered.

Erika took one look at the students and gasped. She clutched at Ginny's hand tightly. Eric saw the students and he ran behind Harry.

Harry knelt down and looked Eric in the eye. "Eric, these are all your friends. No one here is going to hurt you. They wanted to welcome you back."

"You sure?" he asked timidly, eying the strange looking crowd of floppy eared people.

"I'm sure Eric. Why don't we go say hello?" Harry asked with a smile.

Ginny was having a similar conversation with Erika.

After a moment of doubt, the two allowed themselves to be led forward into the smiling crowd of people. It took a while before the twins relaxed and as they did, the party noise level got louder. Music played in a

corner, and people started cleared away the furniture from the center of the room so there was a space for dancing. Fred and George had been very generous in their donations and Eric seemed to find their Canary Creams very funny.

Nearby, Harry and Ginny watched them. Finally, they relaxed as the two kids started to get into the swing of the party.

"It tears at my heart to see them having to go through that Gin," Harry said softly.

"I know, but they're doing better now. They need this release. We all do," she replied.

Harry hugged her tightly for a moment and then went to ask Erika if she'd dance with him.

Erika looked up at him as he led her around the dance floor. "Did Ginny teach you to dance this good, Professor Harry?"

"I suppose she did Erika. I wasn't much of a dancer until I met Ginny," he replied.

"Then I'll have to teach both Eric and my boyfriend to dance so they do it right, won't I?"

Harry chuckled. "Boyfriend? You have one picked out already?"

"Well, since I like Ginny I can't have you. But what about Angelo? He's kinda cute. Yes, I think he'll do very well. I'll take him," she answered quite firmly.

"Have you asked him about this Erika? He may want to have a say in this."

"Oh, he'll be happy that I've made the choice for him, Professor Harry. It's much too important a choice to let you boys handle it."

Harry could only shake his head and wonder if the little girl wasn't right.

The next morning...

Harry woke from another series of bizarre dreams. He was actually beginning to miss his old nightmares. These were getting too weird for him. Ginny hadn't joined him last night and he understood why. Her dorm was off the same stairwell as Erika's, and she wanted to be available in case the little girl needed her.

Harry stretched and his foot touched something cold and hard. He flinched back and sat up. He blinked for a moment in confusion. Lying across his bed under the duvet was the sword of Godric of Gryffindor. He scowled, before getting up to take his shower.

Once dressed, he picked up the sword. Ron, Blaise and Neville looked up in surprise when he pulled the sword out from under the blanket. It made a soft, soothing ring in his head as soon as he touched it.

"Umm... Harry? What are you doing with that?" asked Ron, eyeing the huge weapon warily.

"Damned if I know, Ron. It was here when I woke up." He sighed, and then continued. "I guess I better go give this back to Dumbledore."

Leaving the dorm room, he nearly smiled when, upon reaching the common room, startled students scurried out of his way. He supposed he did look a sight, carrying the large sword like he meant business. Too bad Wan wasn't around!

That scene was repeated all the way to Dumbledore's office. The Headmaster looked up in surprise when he entered.

Harry placed the sword on Dumbledore's desk and sat down in a chair.

"Ah, good morning, Harry. Would you care for a lemon drop?" asked the Headmaster.

There was something in the way the Headmaster said that, a slight note of desperation, that put Harry on his guard.

"No, thank you Headmaster. But perhaps you could explain why I woke up with the sword in my bed this morning?"

Dumbledore looked at the sword for a moment before replying. "To be perfectly honest Harry, I do not know why you awoke with the sword in your bed. It is most puzzling."

"Professor, I've been plagued for weeks now with dreams revolving around this sword, all sorts of dreams. I've even discovered on more than one occasion I've drawn pictures of the sword on homework I've handed in!" he said in exasperation.

"Perhaps you are summoning the sword in your sleep, or perhaps something else is happening. I do not know, Harry. I do not think whatever is happening is necessarily bad. It may even be Hogwarts itself telling you that you need the sword. Has anything changed since the last time you picked up the blade? Does it react differently now?"

Harry looked at his Headmaster and sighed. "I'm probably going to regret telling you this, but I hear a comforting ring in my head when I hold it. It feels right Sir, but at the same time it feels... incomplete. Like something is missing."

"Something is missing from what, Harry?" Dumbledore asked gently.

"That's the problem Sir, I just don't know," replied Harry.

"Very well. There is nothing that can be done until this becomes clearer in your mind. In the meantime, should the sword appear again, I think it prudent that you keep it. Just do not let others handle it, or they could be harmed."

Meanwhile in the Great Hall...

Wan sat with her friends. She was irritated because Danny hadn't sent any letters in the past few days. She looked across the hall with narrowed eyes.

Damn! Potter and his roving band of merry blood traitors protect all the mudbloods and half bloods now! She thought.

And to make matters worse, Potter hadn't forgotten about her detention. Dumbledore had lowered it, but still, she was doomed to two months detention cleaning bathrooms for that damn squib, Filch!

A lone black owl winged its way down to her. Danny's owl! Eagerly she pulled the letter from the owl and sent it on its way. Opening the letter she felt a familiar warmth in the pit of her stomach. Danny was just so romantic! And his erotic letters were to die for!

The second page of his letter was a little darker in nature. Her breath hitched in as she read what he asked her to do.

He loves me and he'll have my ring in just two weeks, she thought. All I have to do is use that spell he taught me over the summer. But it's wrong! Everyone says so! On the other hand, he'll be mine, he's just asking for proof of his love. And he makes me feel so good. She mentally shrugged. As he says, unless someone tests my wand, no one will know I cast it. I'll do it! For Danny!

Blaise and Susan...

Blaise sat at the breakfast table and his eyes seemed to roam continually around the Great Hall. Every so often, they would fix on two different people. Wan Chang and Susan Bones. Wan never noticed his gaze as it lasted only a few seconds. Susan, on the other hand, seemed to always know when he was looking at her because she'd turn to look back at him.

The trip to Madam Puddifoots with Harry had been awkward for him, to say the least. Blaise barely knew Susan but he'd held her hand because it felt right. Like it belonged there. But they hadn't had any time to formalize or even define their relationship. He didn't even know if they had a relationship. He found himself more and more in her company and it unsettled him. The ex-Slytherin and, thanks to Harry, he did consider him self an ex-Slytherin, was not used to being confused about things. To Blaise, there was right and wrong, black and white and no shades in-between. And that's exactly how he felt, except when he looked at Susan, who was definitely making him feel in-between.

There was some motion in the hall and his eyes locked on it like an eagle. He watched Susan leave her friends and join him at his nearly empty table. As much as he tried, he couldn't help but admire her form, the shape of her face, or the sway of her hips. A moment later, the remaining students at his table got up and left, leaving him alone with Susan.

"Would you like to talk about it, Blaise?" she asked, laying a gentle hand on his. His eyes watched her long braid and he wondered what she'd look like with her hair undone.

"You confuse me, Susan. I'm not sure what to say or do. Until last year I didn't think you knew I existed, or I you. And now I can't help but look at you. No matter where you are in a room you draw my eye," he admitted.

She smiled warmly. "I admit that before you joined the brigade, I probably knew your name and no more, Blaise. But you interest me. You have an intensity about you, almost a passion for what you consider your mission. I find that admirable and I have to admit to being curious if that same intensity and passion applies to other aspects of your life."

She intertwined her fingers in his and her knee gently touched his. He looked startled for a moment, then he smiled just a little. He gently pulled his hand free from hers and wrapped his arm around her waist.

"I'm a simple man, Susan, and I do everything with the same level of passion," he replied, pulling her closer to him and kissing her. Susan melted against him. When the kiss ended, she looked into his eyes, her face flushed.

"Indeed you do, Mr. Zabini and I look forward to spending a long time exploring the depths of it," she said huskily, her eyes smoldering.

Serena Pranks Severus...

Serena woke early on Sunday morning. As much as she hated rising early, the letter she received from her sister in America the day before had filled her head with ideas.

Her sister worked for a boat charter company and had complained about the company's computers being hit by something she called a 'virus'. It had taken down their entire system and her sister was extremely upset. While Serena had worked with computers a little, before coming to Hogwarts, she didn't have any experience with viruses, but the idea was intriguing.

Stuffing her sister's letter into her cloak pocket, she turned as her rumpled husband entered the dining room.

"Good morning, Severus," she said cheerfully.

"You're up early," Snape said gruffly, as he walked over and kissed her cheek.

"I need to visit the twins today, and I thought I'd get an early start."

"Which twins?" he asked dryly.

"The Weasley twins."

He scowled. "Why?"

"Well, I have this idea..." As she explained, his scowl deepened. It was no secret that he didn't like the twins, but she was sure that he'd see the possibilities.

"Serena, you're a potions Professor! Leave the Weasley's to their useless antics," he sneered.

"And I thought I was the grumpy one in the morning," she said, her eyes narrowed.

"You must have better things to do with your time," he stated imperiously.

"Oh sure. I'll brew up some wart removal potions and let Voldemort burn the world," she said, sarcastically.

"Serena," he began, raking his fingers through his hair.

"Enough," she said softly, hugging him. "I don't want to fight with you, Severus. Go take your shower and I'll have breakfast on the table when you're done."

Severus would later blame his sneaky wife for taking advantage of his half-awake state, but for the moment, he missed the wicked gleam in her eyes. Giving her a quick squeeze, he turned and left the room, thinking of nothing more than a hot shower and a cup of tea.

Returning twenty minutes later, freshly groomed, he sat down at the table. Serena set a plate of his favorite puff pastries before him and poured him a cup of tea. Taking a sip, he shuddered as the caffeine hit his system.

Feeling more awake, he asked, "How long will you be gone?"

"I don't know. But if you need something, you know where I'll be. I'm going to collect Hermione Granger on my way down. I don't know if my idea will work, but she's become rather proficient at crafting new spells and may be able to help."

"Ah yes, the Gryffindor Know-It-All," he sneered.

"Tut-tut, Severus. There are no more Houses," she said, before kissing him absently on the top of the head in passing. "I'll see you later."

Grumbling under his breath as she left the apartment, he picked up the Daily Prophet and scanned the headlines. Selecting a pastry, he bit into it with real pleasure. Serena knew her pastries, he had to give her that. Finishing the treat, he reached for his tea. With the cup halfway to his mouth, he paused.

What the...His thoughts stopped and his eyes widened as his cheeks started to swell.

Viral Magic...

Entering the Warbangers building, Serena and Hermione looked around for the twins. Serena had allowed the younger witch to read her sister's letter on the walk down from Hogwarts and, just as she suspected, Hermione saw the possibilities. Now, they had to sell the idea to the Weasley's.

Finding the young men in their office, the women waved off their surprised welcome and quickly got down to business. The twins were doubtful at first, but soon became enthusiastic as the idea's potential took hold.

"Research is the first step," Fred said, disgustedly.

At Hermione's surprised look, George smiled. "Yes, we do research, but that doesn't mean we have to like it. We tried skipping the research once and the results were...interesting. It took three weeks for all the feathers to fall out," he added, shaking his head in mock despair.

"At least you had feathers," Fred said with a scowl. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to sleep with porcupine quills sticking out of your body?" He shuddered with the memory.

With identical waves, the twins led the bemused women out of the office and down a dark hallway. When they reached a dead end, both men withdrew their wands and, with a murmur, flicked the now glowing tips of their wands at the brick wall before them three times.

The wall shimmered briefly before melting away to reveal a door. Pulling a key from his pocket, Fred unlocked the door and George ushered Serena and Hermione into the room.

"Welcome to the Weasley's Wizarding Warbangers research department," Fred said grandly as he closed the door behind him. "We should find everything we need here."

Hermione stood stock still, gazing around her in wonder. The room was huge! It was at least as big as the Great Hall at Hogwarts. But what caught her attention was that the room was full of books. Wall to wall, floor to ceiling shelves, crammed with books of all sizes. One long, polished oak table took pride of place in the center of the room. The rest of the space was filled with trunks, some of which were open, revealing scrolls, loose parchment and more books.

"Someone pinch me," Hermione murmured. "I must be dreaming."

"No dream, m'dear..." George said happily.

"...but we'll pinch you if you like," Fred added with a salacious grin.

"Fred, that's Ron's girlfriend you're thinking of pinching!" George exclaimed.

"So? What Ronnikins doesn't know won't hurt him," Fred replied, wiggling his eyebrows.

When George smacked his brother, the fight began. Ignoring them, both women moved deeper into the room to explore.

Hours later, Serena stood and stretched with a groan. They'd made real progress, but her back was killing her and she was getting hungry. Drawing her wand, she conjured food and drink. The twins, smelling food, dropped the scrolls they were perusing and joined her.

"Hermione," Serena called softly when the young witch didn't join them. "Come, eat something."

Hermione muttered irritably and buried her head in another book.

Shaking her head, Serena turned back to the famished twins and grinned at their obvious greed. It wasn't hard to see where Ron got his eating habits!

"I've been meaning to ask," Serena began as she filled her plate. "Where did you get all these books? Some of them are ancient and thought long lost. Others, while not exactly dark magic, are definitely gray in nature."

"Oh, we have our sources, and a very generous investor," Fred said mysteriously.

"Obviously," Serena replied dryly.

"I'm sure understand why we can't divulge that information, Professor," George said with a cheeky smile.

"It's Serena, and yes, I do understand. I simply asked because...well, I've been looking for a few books myself. Nothing illegal or dark, mind you. Just rare."

"If you leave us a list, we'll check with our sources for you," Fred offered.

Serena's reply was interrupted by a shout from Hermione.

"That's it!" the young witch said. "I think I've found it!"

As the twins scrambled over, Hermione made a few quick notes on a piece of parchment and held it up triumphantly.

"It might be a little rough, but it should work," she said with a grin.

When the twins took the parchment from her and began studying it, Serena joined the trio, setting a plate of food before Hermione. "Eat," the Potion Mistress stated firmly.

With a grateful look, the bushy-haired witch did just that. She hadn't realized how hungry she was until the plate was before her.

"Are you sure this spell will work, Hermione?" Fred asked, frowning down at the parchment.

"It should, but there's only one way to find out," she said between bites.

In unspoken agreement, the two men moved away from the table. Turning to face each other, they both drew their wands. At a nod, Fred stated clearly, "Morbus Virga," while pointing his wand not at George's body, but at his wand.

Nothing happened.

When the twins turned to look at Hermione, she rolled her eyes. "Try casting something, George," she said in the patient tone one usually reserves for a child.

With a blush, George grinned sheepishly. "Forgot about that part," he muttered.

Pointing his wand at a dirty plate, he cast a scouring charm. Everyone jumped when, with a loud pop and a flash of light that enveloped the room, twelve squirrels shot out the end of his wand and ran, scurrying around the table.

The twins gaped, Serena laughed and Hermione sat back, grinning with a sense of achievement.

"I'd say it works, Fred," the young witch said, her eyes dancing excitedly.

When Fred raised his wand again to banish the squirrels, the same loud pop and flash of light occurred. This time however, hundreds of small pebbles were ejected from his wand tip.

With a shout, Serena ducked under the table, followed closely by Hermione and George.

"Fred! Don't cast anything!" George yelled.

"Gee, you think?" Fred asked in annoyance. "Brilliant, you are!"

Once the pebbles had stopped ricocheting, everyone climbed out from under the table and eyed Fred. He placed his wand on the table and backed away slowly.

"Wonder how long it lasts?" he asked.

"Umm, actually, I'm not completely sure about that," Hermione stated. At their incredulous looks, she continued quickly. "My research was a little rough, but my best estimate is an hour."

"Well, we can't leave the squirrels in here," George stated. "They may chew on the books. Can't have that!" Pointing his wand, he cast the banishing charm.

"This is beginning to become a habit," Serena muttered to Hermione and Fred under the table as they ducked the rain caused by George's summoned thunderstorm.

"The books!" Hermione cried. "They're getting soaked!"

Ducking a bit lower, she pointed her wand at a bookshelf on the far wall and cast a shielding charm. Everyone bolted from under the table as hundreds of large, hungry land crabs shot out of the wand, infesting their sanctuary.

Three soaked people turned as one and looked at Serena. She pulled out her wand and eyed it dubiously. "Perhaps not," she muttered.

"But the books!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Fine, but the results are on your head," Serena grumbled wetly. Pointing her wand at the nearest bookshelf, she cast the shield charm and groaned as every closed trunk in the room snapped open and expelled their contents in a violent eruption of soggy paper.

"Well, at least the spell works," muttered Fred, dejectedly.

"Yeah, but we'll have to replace the library if this keeps up," George said sourly. "Do you know how much that's going to cost? And some of those books can't be replaced!"

"Dobby!" Serena called loudly.

As everyone turned to look at her, a small pop was heard over the raging thunderstorm.

With a frightened squeak, Dobby ran under the table to avoid the rain. With a squeal, the little elf quickly reappeared, trying to pull a crab off his toe. Serena helped the struggling elf remove the crustacean, then picked him up and placed him on the tabletop.

"Dobby, we have a problem with our wands. Can you banish the storm, the crabs and the squirrels?"

With a nod, the elf waved his hands a few times and the room was cleared.

As everyone thanked him profusely, he squirmed, but said, "I's get the other elves to help Dobby clean." With that, he disappeared with a small pop.

A Drop in a big bucket...

Entering the castle half an hour later, Hermione and Serena headed straight for the Headmaster's office. While the spell had some unexpected results, it had worked. Under the wand virus, the caster became ineffectual. Baring wandless magic, the new spell could be of real value.

"Salt water taffy!" Serena exclaimed.

When the gargoyle moved, both women jumped on the moving stairs and rode them up. Serena didn't bother to knock on the door. Bursting in, she teetered to a stop as she realized the Headmaster wasn't alone. Hermione, not looking, barreled into her back, causing both women to stumble.

"Excuse me, Headmaster. I didn't realize you weren't alone," Serena said sheepishly as she reached out and steadied Hermione.

"Quite all right, my dear," Dumbledore replied. "It must have been important."

"Uh, yes, but we didn't mean to interrupt."

"That's ok, Professor," Harry said from his seat before Dumbledore's desk. "We were just talking about the security measures the Brigade is taking to protect some of the students."

When Ginny nodded in agreement, Ron stood up and walked to Hermione.

"Are you ok?" he asked her.

"I'm fine, Ron. We were in a hurry to tell Professor Dumbledore about a new spell we discovered."

"New spell?" Dumbledore inquired, intrigued.

"What new spell?" Ginny asked at the same time.

"Well, it has some unpredictable results, but nothing harmful. At least, not so far," Serena said.

"Perhaps a demonstration?" The Headmaster asked.

Serena and Hermione looked at each other. When Hermione shrugged and pulled out her wand, Serena moved behind Dumbledore's desk. If the others in the room noticed her movement, no one commented.

"First, everyone needs to put their wands outside the room."

"What?" Harry asked. "Hermione, what are you talking about?"

"Just do it, Harry," Hermione said. "Trust me in this. Take out your wand and place it outside the door."

With puzzled looks and a few shrugs, Ginny, Ron, Harry and Dumbledore all removed their wands. Ginny collected them and set them outside the room. Shutting the door firmly, she leaned against it and raised an eyebrow at Hermione.

With a deep breath, Hermione pointed her wand at a snow globe sitting on a bookshelf and said, "Wingardium Leviosa."

As Hermione cast the spell, Serena ducked behind the desk. She'd learned her lesson the hard way. Better to be safe than sorry, and all that. While she couldn't see what was happening, the sounds coming from the others were proof that her instinct had been correct.

With a pop and a flash of light, lemon drops spewed forth from the tip of Hermione's wand, thousands of them. Millions! They bounced off the walls, ricocheted off windows and rebounded off paintings. Ron was hit between the eyes by an errant drop, causing him to shout and duck behind the desk with Serena. A moment later, Harry shouted and joined them, his glasses broken by the crazy candy cascade.

Dumbledore dropped next, yellow candy decorating his hair and beard. Everyone heard the door slam. Ginny, being the intelligent witch she was, had left the room.

Over the roar of the candy waterfall, those in the room could hear the rather rude curses issuing forth from the annoyed witch responsible for the sugar attack.

"Ouch! Usually it's not this...Ow! That's going to bruise! This should have stopped...ouch!"

A hand appeared from under the desk and a shouted "Finite Incantatem!" came from Ron.

The candy rain stopped, and the shouts began. Irate portrait owners shrieked indignantly at the rough treatment they'd received.

"Silence!" Dumbledore bellowed, standing once again.

The door squeaked open and Ginny pushed her way in. Looking around the room, she gasped. Millions upon millions of lemon drops covered the floor. When she tried to push the door shut, she found it blocked by the little candies as they skittered into the hall and bounced merrily down the stairs.

"Not lemon drops!" she exclaimed.

"I'm afraid so, my dear," Dumbledore said with a resigned chuckle.

Harry scowled. "This is ridiculous!"

"It's just candy, love," Ginny said with a smile.

"Not that, Gin. Didn't any of you notice? With the exception of Hermione, who was occupied, and Ginny, who ran from the room, did anyone here think of casting a shield? No! We all ducked behind the desk!"

When they all gaped at him, he raked his hands through his hair and growled as several yellow drops fell out. "I'm supposed to face Voldemort, yet I'm afraid of lemon drops," he moaned.

When Ginny started to giggle, he glared at her. When Serena and Ron joined the laughter, he grinned sheepishly.

"Umm, Headmaster, you wouldn't mind if I dragged your desk out to the final battle, would you?" he asked, cheekily.

Dumbledore laughed, enjoying the joke. "Whatever you need, my dear boy! Whatever you need!"

"What about this?" Hermione asked, waving a hand at the mess.

"Oh, that's easy," replied Ron. Lifting his hand, he cast the banishing charm wandlessly.

Hermione shrieked as the number of lemon drops doubled, then doubled again.

Serena gaped as she found herself knee deep in candy. Ginny's eyes widened, Ron's mouth dropped open and Harry lost his balance as the drops shifted. When Ron reached out to steady him, he lost his balance and they both disappeared beneath the yellow wave.

"Bugger," Dumbledore exclaimed, eyeing the candy with despair.

Ginny grinned and said, "Freely given, Headmaster! Freely given!"

At Dumbledore's gloomy look, she collapsed in helpless laughter, sliding down the door. As her head vanished from sight, all that indicated her location was the shifting motion of lemon drops and the muffled howls of mirth.

Agony of the lemon drops...

With the help of house elves, the lemon drop invasion was contained. Trunks and boxes were filled with the sweet stuff and stored in an unused chamber of the Headmaster's quarters. Wands had been retrieved and returned to their owners, Harry's glasses had been repaired, and the group now sat grinning at each other. All, that is, except Dumbledore.

With a sigh of dismay, he sank into his chair and rubbed his eyes. He tried to ignore Ginny's giggles, but it was becoming difficult.

"You did ask for a demonstration," Ginny reminded him cheerfully.

At his mock glare, she laughed again. "True, Miss Weasley. But why did it have to be lemon drops?"

"Professor," Ron said. "Why didn't the banishing charm work? I didn't use my wand!"

Dumbledore then explained about the lemon drop bet. As the realization sunk in that she'd just added millions of the candies to the wager, Hermione groaned and apologized profusely.

Dumbledore waved off her apologies, saying, "It's my own fault, my dear. As Miss Weasley gleefully pointed out, I did ask for the demonstration."

"But why didn't the banishing spell work?" Ron asked again, puzzled.

"Because under the bet, the lemon drops must be freely given away, not banished, Mr. Weasley," the Headmaster explained tiredly. When Serena snickered, Dumbledore turned to her. "That reminds me. Serena. Severus was looking for you. He sent me an owl earlier. Rather odd, it was. He could have asked me himself, rather than sending a message," he added, his eyes dancing.

"Oh gods!" Serena exclaimed, jumping out of her chair. "The pastries!"

With that, she bolted from the room.

Serena pays for pastries...

Serena entered the apartment quietly and made her way to the living room. Finding it empty, she moved from room to room, in search of her husband. She knew he'd be annoyed and wasn't really looking forward to explaining herself.

Figuring her luck was holding and that he must be out, she entered the potions lab last. The place was a mess. Potion ingredients were scattered everywhere. Glancing around the room in dismay, she finally found who she was looking for.

Severus sat behind his desk with his head in his hands. His posture radiated a strange mix of agitation and dejected hopelessness.

Confused, and a little apprehensive, Serena debated about making a quick exit. In the end, she couldn't. Something was obviously wrong.

"Severus," she called quietly and blanched when his head whipped up. "Oh my," she murmured as he glared.

His cheeks were inflated. Not just puffy, they were huge. He resembled a chipmunk, if said chipmunk had swallowed a hot air balloon!

"Are you in pain?" she asked fearfully, moving to his side.

He shook his head, still glaring.

"Why didn't you end the spell, Severus?" she asked in dismay.

When he rolled his eyes at her, she caught on.

"Oh, of course. You can't speak," she whispered.

Taking out her wand, she pointed it at her husband and said, "Finite...wait!"

When she dropped her useless wand on the desk, Severus managed a grunt. Picking it up, he tried to force it back into her hand.

"No, I can't use my wand, Severus. I'll explain later. Trust me, if I cast with it, things will get much worse!"

With a disbelieving look, he pulled out his own wand and thrust it at her. Taking it, she shivered as a current of magic traveled up her arm.

Steadying herself, she pointed the wand once more and cast the spell. Biting her lip, she watched as his cheeks deflated with a rude sound.

"Are you all right?" she asked, a bit fearfully.

"What the hell was that?" Severus roared, shoving himself to his feet. "There I was, eating breakfast and minding my own business. The next thing I know, I'm a bloody balloon!"

"I'm sorry," she said. "I thought it would wear off!"

"When? Next week? Bloody hell, woman! What were you thinking?"

"Your comment this morning about the Weasley twins annoyed me. I thought...well, I thought I'd teach you a lesson. Their inventions aren't useless, Severus!" she exclaimed, backing away from him.

"Oh, I'll admit that little prank may have its uses. Feed one to Voldemort and he wouldn't be able to speak for hours! Potter could kill him easily then!"

When she giggled, he took a gliding step towards her. "Do you know I nearly went to Minerva to fix what you'd done? I never would have lived that down! The old bat would have baited me for years to come! I even tried brewing something to end your damn prank, but you know what I found, wife?" he asked, menacingly.

"What?" she asked while trying to hide her amusement. Minerva would have been so pleased!

"Drinking anything with cheeks that large is impossible. It just runs right back out!"

Picturing him trying to drink a potion, Serena gave up and laughed. "Oh gods, Severus, if I had a camera I'd be rich! The expression on your face..."

She broke off with a yelp as he lunged towards her and picked her up. She grunted when he threw her over his shoulder and started from the room.

"I think it's time to teach you a lesson, Serena," he stated, leaving the lab.

"Now Severus," she started, trying to placate him, only to shriek when he reached up and slapped her bottom, hard.

"Severus, if you'll just let me explain!" she tried.

Entering the bedroom, he tossed her gently onto the bed and followed her down.

"Oh no, Serena," he began, pinning her to the bed. "Explanations can come later. Right now, I intend to have my revenge!"

Seeing his hot look, an answering fire appeared in her eyes. As he bent and took her lips in a hard kiss, she made a mental note to send the Weasley twins a thank you gift for their puff pastries. Then she was lost to the hard, demanding man above her.

Chapter 8 - Wan's woes and Portrait of Insanity

Camelford, Bodmin Moor England, Beginning of November...

Esther Cinchley was a widow, her husband had been killed a long time ago in a training accident for the 7th Paras. Now in her late seventies, she walked her block and enjoyed talking with her neighbors on a near daily basis. Everyone considered her the block grandmother. Having never had any children of her own, she was always available to baby sit. Children could often be found playing in or around her small house.

In the past forty years that Esther had lived in this quiet neighborhood, she had only had to call the fire or police department three times. And in each of those cases, she was helping a neighbor.

Now Esther had a problem and it was beginning to really eat at her. One of her newer neighbors seemed to have misplaced two of their children. The third child, a very sweet six year old boy by the name of Jason, seemed to have been injured in the past week.

Esther had talked to the mother, who happened to be pregnant, about the two missing children and that conversation was what had triggered her unease. For more than two weeks, Esther pondered the conversation. It wasn't uncommon for affluent parents in England to send children away to boarding school.

But these parents seemed to lack the financial wherewithal to afford such a luxury. Usually, parents that did send their children away to a boarding school were vocally proud of that fact, but in this case, Esther received a vague story about a school somewhere in Scotland, very exclusive, and very private.

A few days ago Esther had observed little Jason struggling to take out the trash. He had hurt his arm and it was in a sling. Being a retired nurse, Esther had seen many children with broken bones in her day. But the sling and cast bothered her. They didn't appear to be something any hospital in England would want to call their work.

Something was off and, while she prided herself about minding her own business, she couldn't, not with children involved.

She looked up gratefully as the young policeman handed her a cup of tea before sitting himself at his desk.

"Now then Mrs. Cinchley, why don't you tell us what we can do for you today?" asked the officer.

Hogwarts, School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...

Harry growled in frustration and slammed the book closed which earned him a death glare from Madam Pince. Despite having given the sword back to Dumbledore, the dreams continued to plague him. And to make things worse, even his dreams seemed wrong somehow.

Harry had taken to looking up Godric Gryffindor in the school library, which of course had hundreds of books on the subject. Most of them went out of their way to contradict the other books. In fact, he had found one book, which spent twenty chapters explaining why every other book on the subject was wrong, and only three chapters on the topic of Godric himself.

So far he had worked his way through half of the books on the topic and he still didn't have any clue as to what he was looking for. He sighed in aggravation, put his books away and left the library. It was lunchtime and he might as well get something to eat.

Entering the Great Hall, he walked over to his table. He noted that Erika and Eric had finally moved back to their own table with the other first years. He was glad to see they were making an attempt to recover.

He plopped heavily into the chair next to Ginny and sighed.

Everyone looked at him for a moment before Ginny broke the silence. "No luck yet?"

"None. Did you know our library has over five hundred books on the subject? And most claim the others are wrong! One book claimed the sword was actually a lance, and another claimed it was a metaphor for..." He stopped, looking very embarrassed. "Well...a certain male organ and the Dark Lord he conquered was really a witch! And I'm not going to tell you how he conquered her!" he exclaimed, his ears darkening.

Hermione eyed Harry suspiciously. "Harry, you're not going off on another research project like last year, are you?"

He chuckled weakly. "No, 'Mione. This time it's simple history I'm looking up. I keep dreaming about that blasted sword and it doesn't feel right, so I thought I could look up more information on it."

Mollified that Harry wasn't off producing another research paper, Hermione went back to her lunch while Harry filled his plate.

Serena Snape, who had joined them at the table today watched this byplay with amusement. She's absolutely brilliant, but in a way her confidence is almost as lacking as Harry's, she thought.

"Harry, perhaps if you just go get the sword from the Headmaster's office, the dreams will cease," Serena said.

"I thought about that Professor, but I saw several problems with that idea. First, I really have no way of securing a five foot long sword and carrying it around with me is out of the question. I can see it now. I'm walking down the hall and get annoyed enough by something that the sword bursts into flame? The last time I carried that thing in the halls, people were scattering in every direction," he replied.

"Maybe you should try less scowling? I swear you've been around my husband too long. Between the two of you, I'm not sure who scowls more these days," replied Serena teasingly.

Harry scowled at that comment. Turning to Ginny he asked, "Do I scowl that much?"

Ginny reached up and patted his cheek. "Of course not, Harry." She then turned to Serena and winked.

"OY! But he's scowling right now," said Ron.

"Thanks mate! It's nice to know who's on my side," replied Harry dryly. "Oh, Hermione, I almost forgot. I noticed this morning what looked like twenty or so bowls of lemon drops in the common room. The first years seemed quite happy about them. You wouldn't know anything about that would you?" he asked, trying to change the subject.

Hermione flushed and stammered, "Me? Why no, Harry, I wouldn't know anything about it."

Everyone at the table snickered. The truth was Hermione felt terribly guilty over what had happened in the Headmaster's office. The house elves had informed the Headmaster that his supply of lemon drops had increased from the original forty two, to just a hair over four million. It was a secret of course, which meant that by now the whole school knew the story behind the lemon drops.

"Harry," Serena said, gaining his attention once more. "I know this is remote possibility, but since you're so interested Godric, have you thought about asking some of the portraits about them?"

He paused and grew thoughtful. "You know Professor, that's actually a good idea. There must be thousands of portraits in the castle, maybe one knows more about the sword or can tell me where I can find more information."

Ginny, sitting next to Harry, sighed into her drink. Harry was spending more time with her this year and she was very grateful for that, but somehow the idea of spending her hours running around asking portraits questions wasn't her idea of a romantic date.

Harry, sensing her mood leaned over and whispered in her ear, "Don't worry love, we'll think of something." Then he kissed her forehead and turned his attention back to lunch.

Ministry of Magic, Department of Muggle Relations...

This was once a small department, but that had changed. Under the gentle guidance of Arthur Weasley, the office had been expanded and so had the staff. Muggle Relations was, after all, the department in charge with making sure the Ministry of Magic worked hand in hand with the Muggle British Government.

In a corner office a small bell chimed and a piece of parchment suddenly appeared. The secretary took a look at the parchment and placed it in the appropriate office box for routing. A short while later, an owl entered and latched onto the box by the handle, its destination, Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts

Dumbledore sat in his office contemplating things. Apparently, Miss Granger had been helping herself to his lemon drop supply and the first year students were avidly taking advantage of the sweets scattered around the common room. He had forgotten how the first and second year students were at the mercy of owls from parents or an older friend to bring them back sweets from Honeydukes.

I must make more effort to reach out to our first years. Had I only known this fifty years ago, I could have easily gotten rid of those lemon drops, he thought wryly.

Since the one incident with the sword, it had not left his office. But he felt that would change soon enough. Even he could feel the tension building in the castle. Giving Harry the sword was only one of the things it was doing to prepare for what was coming.

The Common Room, that evening...

Harry sat with Ginny on one of the couches in the common room. Hermione was helping Erika with her homework, while Eric was busy trouncing Ron in Wizard's Chess again. Harry felt uneasy tonight. He couldn't put his finger on it, but something was wrong and it was really starting to bother him.

Harry's locket gave several sharp thumps against his chest. He remembered the last time that had happened. His book slid from his fingers as he stood. He must fight this!

Camelford, Bodmin Moor England...

It was just after dusk and there were a series of popping noises outside of the house. The Death Eaters fanned out, circling it. Within moments, all of the windows and doors had been sealed shut. With a nod from their leader, the house was set ablaze.

To the surprise of the Death Eaters, no sound came from within. The leader ran a quick scan of the house and discovered it was empty. He signaled to the others to leave.

Before following the rest, he cast the Death Mark above the house anyway. Maybe someone would take it as a warning, even if they hadn't hit their targets.

This target was a waste of time. Burning down an empty house would be a bother, but wouldn't instill fear in anyone. On the other hand, thirty nine other Death Eater teams that night would have far more luck.

Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts...

Dumbledore nearly fell out of his seat when Fawkes screamed behind him and launched himself into the air. He circled the room in an agitated manner then flew out the window screaming.

The Common Room...

Ginny looked up curiously as Harry stood, dropping his book to the floor. She could see him shrink into himself as if he was warding off a blow.

There was a flash of flame and suddenly Fawkes appeared. The large bird circled over Harry before landing on his shoulder singing a soothing song. The bird continued to croon to him and nudged him with his head.

"What's wrong?" Ginny asked.

Ignoring her, he started walking slowly to the nearest exit, his movements jerky. Fawkes continued to croon on his shoulder.

Ginny, Ron and Hermione exchanged looks. This wasn't another scar attack. They had taken considerable precautions with Harry's salve, including keeping several pots scattered between Ginny and Hermione's trunks.

"Ron, stay here," said Hermione. "Ginny and I will see what's going on."

Following Harry, Ginny wanted to try to snap him out of this strange behavior of his, but Hermione stopped her. "Don't. We don't know what's happening, Ginny. Fawkes is trying to keep him calm at the moment. Let's just follow and see what he does."

A few moments later, Harry's destination was clear. He was clearly heading for the infirmary, the two girls following closely behind. Along the way, he paused and trembled several times, and each time Fawkes would increase the volume of his song.

When Harry arrived in the infirmary, he walked over to one of the potions cabinets and collapsed the locking charms on it. Madam Pomfrey came out of the office just as he reached into the cabinet and pulled out a dreamless sleep potion and downed it.

She could see something was wrong. Fawkes' song was what originally brought her out of the office in the first place.

His movements became jerkier as he approached a bed, his eyelids were already drooping. Fawkes leapt aloft and glided to the headboard of the bed.

Madam Pomfrey still wasn't sure what was happening, but she pulled a blanket out of a cabinet and placed it over him. After running a few scans and finding nothing physically wrong with him, she turned back to her office to call the Headmaster.

Ginny and Hermione approached the still figure on the bed, not understanding what was taking place. Harry lay quietly. The potion had put him to sleep, but for some reason tears were running down his cheeks.

They were startled when they heard the Headmaster's voice. "I had wondered where Fawkes had gone off to," he said sadly, looking down at the sleeping Harry.

"Sir? What's happening to him?" asked Ginny.

"I daresay he is reacting to another set of Muggle attacks tonight. Judging by both his and Fawkes' reactions, I expect that tonight's activities are worse than the last."

Hermione gasped and sat weakly on a bed. Her parents were safely in Grimmauld Place, but she couldn't help but worry about all the other families out there.

Ginny reached out and took Harry's hand. Even in his sleep, he tried to draw her closer to him.

"Headmaster, he should be out for hours. He came in here and just helped himself to one of my strongest dreamless sleep potions," said Madam Pomfrey.

Dumbledore nodded absently, still watching Harry and Fawkes. "Miss Granger, Miss Weasley, there is nothing more that can be done tonight. I suggest you return to the common room. Undoubtedly, Mr. Potter will rejoin you tomorrow."

Ginny looked like she wanted to argue for a moment, then she put Harry's hand back on the bed and left with Hermione.

Headmaster's Office, the next day...

Dumbledore sat at his desk reading reports detailing some of the attacks that took place last night. Madam Pomfrey had called earlier to let him know Harry Potter had finally awoke and seemed to be suffering no ill effects. She had released him to return to class.

The fire flared as Arthur Weasley's head appeared in the floo.

"Headmaster, would you mind if Molly and I came over? I've run into a bit of a problem here at the Ministry and it involves some of your students. Also, it might help if you ask Madam Pomfrey to join us with a couple doses of calming draughts, just in case."

"Not at all, Arthur. Give me a few minutes to have Madam Pomfrey join us," Dumbledore replied.

Arthur nodded and the fire flared again before returning to normal. Dumbledore summoned Poppy via his office floo.

When Madam Pomfrey arrived with a bag of supplies, Dumbledore motioned her to a chair. "Poppy, have a seat. Arthur Weasley and his wife will be joining us shortly. I do not know why, but it has to do with the attacks last night I believe."

The previous night had been brutal. Over one hundred muggles had been killed. Twelve students woke up to find themselves orphaned. The teachers were coping as best as they could, as were the rest of the students, but it was a very tense school this morning.

The fireplace flared once more and Arthur and Molly Weasley stepped through, as did Auror William Hill, who led a small child no older than six years old.

Dumbledore arched an eyebrow at Arthur, who smiled apologetically before speaking, "I'm sorry for this intrusion Headmaster, but we ran into a problem this morning and, since it directly concerned two of your students, we felt that your advice would be invaluable."

Dumbledore motioned for them to be seated. Poppy, seeing the small boy, went over to check him. He was dirty and his arm was splinted with a filthy sling around his neck.

The floo flared again and Remus and Tonks stepped from the fire. Dumbledore looked at the two enquiringly.

Remus looked at Tonks. She blushed and fumbled around for a bit before looking at Dumbledore defiantly. "I want to be here also," she said.

Dumbledore gave her a penetrating look before consenting.

"Headmaster, perhaps it's best if Auror Hill begin the story. He was the one assigned to this case, prior to the attacks," started Arthur.

All eyes turned to Auror Hill, who cleared his throat before beginning. "Sir, a few days ago we intercepted a request to the Muggle Child Protective Services to investigate a complaint against the Stonesmith family in Camelford. As it turns out, the parents in question have three children. Two here in Hogwarts, and a six year old, Jason," he said pointing to the small boy.

"When we arrived this morning to begin our investigation, we found that the house had been destroyed last night and the parents were picking through the wreckage for anything salvageable. We explained why we were there. Prior to my arrival, some of my colleagues had explained why their house had been destroyed. The boy, Jason, was kept in the car the whole time we talked to his parents.

"What surprised us was the parent's attitude. They were terrified. So much so that they told us to take the children away from them or they would refuse to care for them. I have to admit, in the fifteen years I have been involved in child care cases like these, I have rarely seen a parent so willingly give up his or her rights.

"So there we have it, three magical children. Two are here in school, so their case isn't classed as an emergency. But Jason is." At Dumbledore's questioning look, Hill sighed. "Yes, we tested Jason. He does show a magical aptitude and I expect he will be receiving a letter from Hogwarts in his eleventh year.

"I suspect Mrs. Lupin is here because of her interest in the twins," Hill continued. "I've involved Mr. and Mrs. Weasley because they are the only magical parents I know of with any experience in dealing with muggle raised magical children. Although I will admit, Harry was not really a child when the Weasley's took him in."

Poppy looked up from checking over Jason and led him over to a chair. The boy was a younger image of his older brother. He looked at the strange people, not really understanding what was going on.

"Poppy, how is he?" asked Dumbledore softly.

"He's tired and could use a bath Headmaster. He's a little undernourished but not severely so, and the break in his arm was set badly. It will need to be re-broken and set properly," she replied.

Molly moved over to sit next to Jason. She smiled at him and smoothed the hair out of his eyes. He looked up at her shyly.

Dumbledore looked back at Hill. "Tell me, are you wishing to find permanent placement today for all three Stonesmith children, or temporary?"

"Headmaster, I can only issue temporary placements. You know that. My purpose here was to consult with you, and perhaps see if the Weasleys might be willing to take these children in. I knew of Auror Tonks' involvement with the older two children, but I was not aware that her level of interest was this high."

"Our involvement is both professional and personal Auror Hill," Remus replied. "My wife has considerable feelings, as do I, for the twins and is understandably concerned. As executive officer of the Diggory-Black War Relief fund, I also have a professional interest."

Tonks looked to be bursting to say something, but held her tongue when Remus placed a hand on her shoulder.

Dumbledore nodded, then turned to look at the Weasleys. "I understand all three of your children have become quite attached to the twins here in school. But are you willing to accept new children in your home?"

Before either you could reply Tonks blurted out, "If they won't, I will!"

"Tonks you can't," said Remus softly, looking his wife in the eye.

Her lip trembled slightly, but she looked at him defiantly.

"Nymph, I'm not turning these kids away. I'd love to bring into our home, but we can't. You're an Auror, Nymph. These kids just lost their parents. Are you willing to let them run the risk of losing a mother again?" Remus asked softly.

"Damnit Remus! That's not fair," she cried.

"I know it isn't fair sweetie, but it's true and you know it. Jason here needs a full time Mom for the next couple years. One that will be there for him. Are you ready to make that kind of change?" he asked.

Tonks paced the office in frustration, her hair cycling wildly. Molly looked at the younger woman shrewdly for a moment before she spoke. "Headmaster, I believe that the smart thing would be to allow us to take them in temporarily while a more permanent placement is explored."

Dumbledore looked at Molly with a knowing smile.

Remus turned to Arthur. "I'll send over a contractor later today to look into adding an additional bedroom to your home."

Arthur nodded gratefully at that.

"The next issue is, how do we approach this with the twins?" asked Dumbledore.

Poppy shot Dumbledore a warning look, then suggested she take Jason to the infirmary to repair his arm properly.

"Hmm... Yes, perhaps it would be best if Poppy attended to that while we discuss this further," he replied.

Second Year Defense Against the Dark Arts Class...

The noise was stupendous. Severus sat in a corner of the classroom trying to hide a grin, but he even he had to admit that Harry's idea seemed to be working. Harry had conjured balloons and the class was working on aiming accuracy by firing a sparking hex at them.

The kids were blowing up balloons and loving every second of it while Harry walked among them correcting their aiming techniques.

Dobby appeared next to Severus, startling him. The noise of the balloons exploding completely covered the noise of his appearance. Dobby handed Severus a note, which he read before signaling Harry to come over.

Giving the note to Harry, he stood and took the younger man's place, walking around the classroom and supervising the students.

Professor Potter,

Please collect Mr. Weasley from Divination class, Miss Weasley from Potion class and the Stonesmith children from Transfiguration class and bring them to my office.

Albus Dumbledore

Headmaster, Hogwarts.

Harry scrawled additional comments to the bottom of the note. One was to Professor Trelawney, the other to Professor Snape, asking that the Weasleys meet him in Professor McGonagall's class.

"Dobby, would you please take this to the Divination and Potions professors please?" he asked.

The little elf nodded, took the note and vanished with a pop.

A short time later, Harry met up with his friends just outside Professor McGonagall's class.

"OY Mate! I'm glad you got me out of divination. Trelawney had just finished predicting that I'd either have fourteen kids, or I'd be trampled to death by fourteen raging sphinxes before I reach twenty," Ron said with a grin.

Harry snorted with amusement. Trelawney had been predicting death and doom for years now, usually his own. Shaking his head, Harry stepped into the classroom and coughed to catch Professor McGonagall's attention. She turned from the blackboard to look at him.

"Excuse me Professor, but the Headmaster has requested that I escort Mr. & Miss. Stonesmith to his office," he said.

"Very well, Professor Potter. Mr. Stonesmith, Miss Stonesmith, gather your belongings and accompany Professor Potter, please."

The twins gathered up their notes and books and followed Harry from the class. Once outside, Erika looked up at Harry fearfully.

"Professor Harry, are we in trouble?" she asked.

"I don't think so. The Headmaster asked to see all of us, not just you and Eric," he replied with a smile. He noted that even though Eric had been holding Erika's hand, he had also grasped Ginny's as well.

Entering the Headmaster's office, Harry was surprised to see so many people there. Dumbledore sat behind his desk with Molly and Arthur standing behind him. Remus and Tonks stood off to one side next to William Hill.

Harry could feel the tension in the room. Tonks looked like she wanted to rush over to the twins, but Remus had an arm wrapped around her. Harry guided Erika and Eric over to two seats in front of the Headmaster's desk, and then he moved to stand next to Erika in her chair.

"What's happened?" he asked bluntly.

Dumbledore looked like he was feeling the weight of his long years. "Last night, there was a fire. Mr. and Miss Stonesmith's home was burned to the ground. Now don't worry, no one was injured. But until the home can be rebuilt, we need to find other accommodations for Miss Stonesmith and her two brothers."

Erika looked up sharply. "Jason is here? Is he ok?" she asked, interrupting the Headmaster.

He smiled gently at her. "Yes, Miss Stonesmith. Madam Pomfrey is looking after him right now. I daresay you will be able to see him in an hour or two."

Eric leaned over and whispered something in Erika's ear. She gasped and turned back to the Headmaster, her eyes suddenly hard.

"They've finally done it, haven't they Sir?" she asked. She was trying to be strong, but Eric was leaning into her, his eyes streaming tears. Her own emotions boiled just below the surface. She wrapped an arm around her brother. Ginny knelt next to the two and tried to comfort them. Erika's lower lip trembled, but she finally blurted out, "They've finally kicked us out for being freaks, haven't they?"

Harry jumped like he had been struck. He looked down at the two kids and then back to the Headmaster. "Tell them the truth, Sir," he said between clenched teeth. He reached down and put a hand on Erika's shoulder.

Dumbledore sighed and lifted his glasses off the bridge of his nose. Of all the things he had to do as Headmaster, this was the most heartbreak. After rubbing his nose tiredly, he replaced his glasses and looked at the twins. The sadness in his eyes was unmistakable. "I'm sorry to say Erika, you have guessed correctly. Your parents are afraid of the unique abilities you and your brothers share. As of this morning, they have waived their parental rights. The Ministry of Magic has stepped in, to make sure that the three of you are well cared for."

Erika pulled her brother tight to her as he started to cry. She scowled and tried to maintain control. "It'll be ok, Eric," she murmured. "I won't let them separate us. We're better off without them anyway!" she finished fiercely.

Tonks tried to break free from Remus, but he held her back. Seeing it, Molly stepped forward and smiled at the twins. "Eric, Erika, I'm Molly Weasley. I'm Ginny and Ronald's Mum..."

"Mine too," Harry said. When Molly looked up at him, her eyes gleaming, he sent her a soft smile.

"Yes I'm Harry's mum too," Molly said. "We'd really like it if you would come to stay with us for a while."

Erika turned to look at Harry, her eyes finally filling with tears. "We'd get to stay with you, Professor Harry? And Ginny and Ron too? You'd be our family? Jason too?"

Harry smiled through his own tears. "You'd be family no matter where you stayed Erika, but yes. Molly's a great Mum. She took me in when my family turned their back on me. You'd be able to come home with us at Christmas. We'll have a big Christmas celebration, would you like that?"

Eric watched this carefully while holding his sister. He held his breath and waited for Erika to make up their mind. After searching Harry and Molly's eyes for a long moment, she nodded.

Molly opened her arms to the girl. Erika looked at her shyly, and then leaned forward to give her a hug. Then Molly, pulled Eric in with them.

Tonks smiled a little, but it was a strained. Molly glanced down at the twins and asked them if they'd like to visit their brother in the infirmary.

Arthur waited until Molly, the twins and the other students filed out of the office before turning at Remus and Tonks. "Nymph, we'll take good care of them. And this is temporary. It should give you time to consider your options," he said softly.

Tonks looked at him and nodded gratefully.

Hogwarts infirmary...

Molly led her now expanded family through the doors of the infirmary. Poppy looked up as the troop of people entered the room. Erika and Eric both squealed upon seeing Jason and rushed forward, but Poppy stopped them.

"Now, now! Give him a moment. He'll be fine. You can even take him to lunch in a little while. Right now however, he needs to relax."

Upon seeing his brother and sister, Jason broke into a huge grin. Erika walked over to sit next to him.

Poppy smiled at the plump redhead witch. "He'll be fine, Molly," she said, seeing the woman's concerned look. "The arm is healing nicely. I am concerned about him however. He has not spoken the entire time I've been with him."

There was a tugging at her skirt and she looked down to see Eric. "He doesn't talk, Madam Pomfrey," he said quietly. "He hasn't for a long time."

Poppy and Molly exchanged a look, then Poppy leaned over and thanked Eric for the information.

Harry was sitting next to Erika, looking at Jason. He smiled at the little boy while listening to Erika talk about all the magic she was learning. She tried to demonstrate by transfiguring a box of tissues on his night table

into a box of chocolate frogs. Unfortunately it didn't quite work as well as she wanted, and she ended up with a box of chocolate tissues. Jason didn't mind. Chocolate, being chocolate, is important in any shape.

Harry leaned over and conjured a small teddy bear dressed in an "I love Hogwarts" t-shirt. Holding the bear out to the small boy, he watched as Jason's eyes grew large. Taking the bear, he hugged it tight and looked up at the emerald-eyed man.

"Jason, I'm Harry, this is Ginny and that's Ron. We're going to be part of your family now. Just like Erika and Eric." Then he pointed at Mrs. Weasley and said, "That's Molly. You're going to be living with her and Arthur for a while."

Jason looked up at Erika for confirmation. The young girl nodded at him and explained what she'd learned about the Weasley's and how'd they'd all be together now.

Molly joined them and smiled at the boy. "Jason dear, we're going to go have lunch with your brothers and sisters, then we'll take you to your new home. I think you'll really like it there, and Erika and Eric will be able to send you letters from school. I know you've missed them."

He smiled shyly at her, and then he clutched his bear and box of chocolate tissues as he reached for her hand. Seeing the trust in the child's eyes, knowing at least a small part of his family history, it nearly broke her heart.

Taking Jason's hand, she looked up as Harry placed an arm over her shoulders. Meeting his eyes, seeing the understanding in them, she smiled softly.

Harry leaned in and kissed her cheek, murmuring, "I love you, Molly."

----- Harry and the Paintings...

Harry had spent the next week wandering the castle in his free time, talking to the portraits. He was especially interested in the older ones, the ones that might have existed around the time of the founders. Unfortunately there were very few of those paintings left, and most of those that did exist were not enchanted paintings.

Harry limped into the common room one evening, an hour before curfew. His robe was torn and he had several scratches on his face, making him look like he'd tangled with several angry cats.

Ginny and Hermione were helping Erika with her charms homework. Eric was again playing Ron at Wizard's Chess. Everyone was surprised to find that, even though Erika was bright and outgoing, Eric was the more capable of the two in magic. He also finished his homework before his sister every night.

Harry sat heavily on the couch next to Ginny and Erika. He leaned back and closed his eyes to relax for a moment.

"What happened to you?" asked Ginny, looking up in surprise at Harry.

He cracked one eye open and looked at her. "I went exploring for more portraits to talk to. One of them told me that a bunch of older, faded portraits had been moved to a sub level of dungeons years ago. I think I found the entrance to the sub level, but it's protected. I found a trap door in a small closet and when I lifted the door, hundreds of bats flew out. I managed to slam the door shut and banish the bats. Well, most of them anyway.

"I guess I should have expected it, really. Basilisks, bats, birds, spiders and trolls in the girl's bathrooms. This castle has more creepy crawly critters than it does people," he replied with a heavy sigh. "The funny

thing is, that trap door doesn't appear on the Marauder's map. For all I know, it could be an entrance to the castle sewers."

Hermione frowned at him. "Harry, you should be more careful. Bats can carry all sorts of nasty diseases and such. Besides, I've heard that the lower levels were condemned for being unsafe. You don't want to get trapped down there alone," she said with some degree of asperity.

Harry eyed Hermione for a moment, "Are you volunteering to help search with me?" he asked teasingly.

Hermione put a hand to her thick bushy hair and frowned. "Um... No, I don't think so Harry," she replied.

Harry looked at her for a moment and muttered, "I didn't think so."

He pulled out his sketchpad and enlarged it so he could use it. Erika, who'd finally finished her homework, decided it was time to play 'annoy her new big brother'. She moved over to sit next to Harry. She looked at the pictures he had drawn as he flipped pages looking for a blank sheet to draw on. She was pleased to find that, interspersed in the images of Ginny, the sword and other images, were pictures of her and Eric. There was even one of Jason with his teddy bear. Then something caught her eye.

"Professor Harry?" she asked.

"Hmm?"

"How come you changed the sword picture?" she asked curiously.

Ginny curled up against Harry's shoulder and looked at the picture of the sword Harry had drawn.

"Changed the picture, Erika? What do you mean?" he asked, looking at her.

"Well flip back a page or two. This picture isn't the same as the sword only a few pages back," she replied with certainty.

Harry flipped back and forth between the two images. There was a subtle difference to the drawings he had made. They were slight. In the latest drawings there were shadows on the handle, not well defined, but definitely there.

Handing the sketchpad to Ginny he stood and said, "I'll be right back."

Leaving the common room, he ran up to his dorm. He returned a few moments later, Pensieve in hand. Squeezing back into his place between Ginny and Erika, he placed the Pensieve on the table and extracted the memory of the sword from the time it had appeared in his bed.

He activated the Pensieve in presentation mode so everyone could see the sword.

"NEAT!" cried Eric, tearing his eyes away from the game. Ron, seizing the chance while Eric was distracted, tried to remove one of his castles from the board, only to have Hermione smack him in the back of his head.

"RONALD BELIUS WEASLEY! I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU'D DO THAT!" she said with a glare.

Eric immediately turned back to the board and shot Ron a suspicious look. He then moved his rook and looked up with glee. "Check mate, mate!" the young boy cried happily.

Ron leaned back in his chair like he had been slapped. "Oh bloody hell!"

Hermione smacked him again. "Language, Ronald!"

Harry and Ginny laughed for a moment before turning back to the image in the Pensieve. He flipped a few pages back in his sketchbook. Comparing the two, he found that the sword in the Pensieve was identical to the one he'd drawn. Harry's drawings were unusually accurate. Ginny had once claimed that he'd drawn her portrait with the correct number of freckles.

"I wonder if I should go look at the sword again? I don't know why the drawing has changed. What do you think, Gin?" he asked.

Before she could reply there was a popping sound and the sword appeared right in front of him. Before it could drop to the floor, his hand snatched it from the air.

Ron watched and moaned, "Oh, what a waste! Those wonderful seeker reflexes sitting on the sidelines."

Harry grinned at Ron for a moment, then turned his attention back to the sword.

"I don't think you need to go get the sword, Harry," Ginny murmured, grinning at him.

Harry chuckled and went back to examining the hilt of the sword. There was a difference this time. The sword wasn't very ornate, but the hilt had the crest of Gryffindor on two sides. Now, between the two crest engravings, there were two indentations. Subtler still were several indentations carefully built into the crests.

"Are you sure that's the same sword?" asked Hermione.

"It's the same sword alright 'Mione. I can hear it singing to me," he replied, "But somehow it's changed itself."

"Singing to you?" asked Ginny.

He placed the sketchpad down on the table in front of him and, still holding the sword in one hand, he took Ginny's hand in the other. "Listen with your mind Ginny. Close your eyes and hear what I'm hearing," he said softly.

A moment later Ginny gasped. "Harry, it's like bells, hundreds of bells ringing, but very soft. Soothing almost."

"That's the sword's song. It's what I hear every time I hold it," he replied looking at her.

He carefully put the sword on the table and stared at it for a while. "I guess there's no sense returning it. The Headmaster told me to hold onto it if it ever appeared again." He checked a nearby wall clock. "Well everyone, we have some 'business' to attend to tomorrow, so I think I'll shower and go to bed early."

Ron, Hermione and Ginny looked at him knowingly before packing up their things. Harry grabbed Ginny for a good night kiss. He wrapped his arms around her and she slowly ran her fingers through his hair, returning the kiss with as much passion.

Harry broke the kiss, feeling like he was being watched. Turning, he saw Erika watching them closely.

"Don't mind me," the little girl said with a grin. "I'm just watching so I know how I want to be kissed by my boyfriend."

Hogsmeade Weekend, 2nd weekend in November...

Wan was hiding behind a bush, waiting. She had left very early to avoid most of the students. The timing on this was tricky, but Danny should be waiting for her to arrive. He had specifically told her he would be. There! Her target approached and she was alone.

Michele McGlover, a pretty, petite blond third year was heading into town. She was muggleborn and one of the few not to ask the Brigade for protection. Wan lifted her wand and fired off her curse. Then she stepped out from behind the bush and joined Michele as she walked down the road.

Michele turned to Wan. "Oh Wan, I'm so happy you decided to join me. Where shall we go first? This is only my second trip to Hogsmeade."

"The Three Broomsticks of course, silly! Didn't I tell you my friend wanted to meet you, Michele?" asked Wan.

Michele nodded happily.

Hogwarts, 7th year boy's dorm...

A hand shook Harry awake roughly. He blinked and reached for his glasses.

"Blaise? What's the matter?" he asked sleepily.

"Harry, Wan is gone. She left early, before breakfast!"

Harry came instantly awake. "Get your squad out to the Three Broomsticks. I'll probably get there before you, but I'll wait for you. In the meantime, I'll wake Ron, Hermione and Ginny. If you get there early, don't move in unless this Danny person is going to leave."

Blaise nodded and left the dorm room at a run.

Harry dressed hurriedly, then went to shake Ron awake. "OY RON! Get up. Wan's left early."

Ron rolled out of bed and looked around wildly. "She's left already? What a bloody muck up!" Ron growled.

"There's no time. I want you to wait with Ginny and Hermione in the Shrieking Shack. I'm going to go wake up them up now."

Ron nodded and started throwing his clothes on.

Harry watched for a moment to make sure Ron was really awake, then he transformed into Wings and vanished in a flash of flame.

Hermione was just climbing out of bed when there was a burst of flame in front of her. She squeaked in surprise and fell back into the bed as Harry transformed back into his normal self.

"Mione, Wan's gone already. Wake up Ginny and get to the Shrieking Shack. With a little luck, you'll have 15 minutes to set up," Harry hissed at her, trying to keep his voice low.

Hermione was concentrating so hard on what Harry was saying that it barely registered that she was half naked in front of her best friend. "We're on our way, Harry."

The Three Broomsticks...

Harry transformed back into Wings again and vanished, only to reappear, high above the Three Broomsticks. In the distance, he could see Blaise's security squad running down the road. They didn't want the sound of an apparition to warn off their targets.

Wings glided by the window of room number three. His keen eyes spotted three figures in the room instead of two. Landing behind the Three Broomsticks he transformed and walked around to the front of the building just as Blaise and his squad arrived.

Harry motioned them to be silent. "There are three people in the room. If we all enter the building at one time, we'll attract too much attention. I want everyone to come up, one minute apart."

After seeing them all accept his command, Harry entered the building and went straight up to room number three. Through the door he could hear two voices and another person sobbing. Harry wasn't sure what was going on, but he was beginning to regret the need to avoid suspicion downstairs.

Ten long minutes later, they were all gathered in front of the door. Harry looked around. Everyone was ready and wands were out. Harry muttered a spell under his breath, banishing the hinges on the door and then he collapsed the locking charm. He nodded to Blaise who gave the door a swift kick. The door fell inwards and they charged into the room.

Blaise stunned Wan with a well-placed Stupefy as Harry turned to Danny and muttered "Ossium Populatio".

Danny collapsed to the ground and writhed in pain. Harry walked over and removed his wand. "It's not as bad as Crucio, Danny, but the bone growing spell cast on the entire body is quite painful," he said clinically. Then he released him from the spell.

Harry looked over at the sobbing girl in the corner. While Wan was fully dressed, Michele had her blouse and bra torn from her body. What remained hung in tatters and provided absolutely no cover whatsoever. Harry transfigured the pillow into an oversized sweat shirt and took it over to her.

Handing the girl the shirt, she immediately pulled it to her chest.

"Michele, look at me. You know me, right?" Harry asked gently.

She nodded, tears still streaming down her cheeks.

"In a few minutes we're all going to go somewhere. You'll be safe, but I need you to be strong for me, Michele. If you want to make sure these two will never hurt another person again, but you need to be strong. Alright?"

She nodded again.

"I'm going to turn around now and hide you from the others so you can put that shirt on. Then we're all going to go somewhere nearby. I'll make sure your safe, Michele. Do you trust me?"

"Y-Yes I trust you Harry. I'm sorry, I c-c-couldn't stop myself," she stammered.

"Shhh... it will be alright, Michele. I promise you. Your safe now."

Harry turned around to let the girl put on the sweat shirt.

"Blaise? Are you ready to transport?" Harry asked.

"Yes, Harry. Both prisoners are bound."

"Good. Now we'll see if Hermione managed to figure out the portkey spell after all," he said pulling a length of rope from his pocket. "Here, take one end Blaise and thread it through their binds. Everyone grab on."

Harry turned to look at Michele. She smiled shakily at him and grabbed a piece of the rope. He winked back at her, and then made a quick check to see everyone had a grip on the rope. Nodding, he activated the portkey with his wand.

The Shrieking Shack...

Everyone appeared in what used to be the living room of the Shrieking Shack. Harry fell flat on his face with his landing. Groaning he looked around to see everyone else standing.

"Hermione, can't you fix that?" he asked.

"Sorry Harry, but there's nothing wrong with the spell. It's your landings," she said with a smirk, and then she noticed Michele and her face fell.

"Michele? What are you doing here?" Hermione asked walking over to the girl. Michele started to cry again. Hermione wrapped an arm around her and led her into another room where they could talk. Ginny followed to help.

"Ron, Blaise, get our guests set up for our little dog and pony show. I'll go get our friends."

Ron and Blaise nodded at Harry while he transformed into Wings and vanished.

Grimmauld Place...

Harry appeared in the living room of Grimmauld Place and looked around.

"TONKS!" he yelled.

Remus came bursting into the room from the kitchen, a fork with some bacon skewered to it still in his hand.

"Harry! What's wrong? Why are you here? What's happened?" he asked.

"I need Tonks, Remus. Is she here?"

"Yes. She's upstairs getting dressed," he replied, clearly bewildered.

"Will you get her for me Remus? I need AUROR Tonks and to bring two anti-apparation manacles with her," he replied grimly.

With a nod, the man dropped his fork and dashed up the stairs.

Tonks and Remus came downstairs a few moments later. Manacles clipped to her belt, Tonks approached Harry, concerned. "What in the name of Merlin is going on? I haven't even had my morning tea yet!"

"You'll find out soon enough, but first we need to pick up the Headmaster and Madam Pomfrey. Remus, if you want to be in on this, then I suggest you apparate to the Shrieking Shack. Do NOT enter until I send someone out to get you. Understand?"

Tonks and Remus exchanged looks. Whatever was going on, Harry was deadly serious about it.

Harry transformed into Wings and flew to Tonks. She grabbed a feather and in a flash they were off, back to Hogwarts to pick up Madam Pomfrey and the Headmaster.

The Shrieking Shack...

Danny and Wan were securely bound to two straight back chairs. Nearby were a small table with a vial of veritaserum, two wands and Harry's Pensieve. In front of the two prisoners were multiple chairs. Behind each prisoner stood a member of Blaise's security squad. Each prisoner had been silenced with a charm.

Ron and Blaise were talking near the entrance of the Shrieking Shack. Hermione and Ginny were still in the other room with Michele. Wings reappeared in a flash, the Headmaster, Madam Pomfrey and Tonks in tow. Harry changed back into human form and stopped Madam Pomfrey from going to check on Wan.

"Madam Pomfrey, your charge is in the other room," he said coldly, pointing to another door. "She needs a calming draught and should probably be checked for possible rape. Ginny and Hermione are with her now."

Madam Pomfrey stared at Harry for a moment and then rushed into the other room.

"Harry, what is going on here?" asked the Headmaster.

"One moment please, Sir. Blaise, Remus Lupin should be here shortly. As soon as he arrives, please let him enter."

Three minutes later, Remus entered the shack. Blaise walked over to the table and placed a memory into the Pensieve. Harry gestured for everyone to take a seat.

"Headmaster, Auror Tonks, what you are about to witness occurred during the last Hogsmeade Weekend. It's the reason why we're here now," Harry said before nodding to Blaise to start the playback. The scene above the Pensieve wavered for a moment before solidifying into an interior view of the Three Broomsticks.

A tall young man entered. Wan waved and he returned her wave. He went over to the inn keeper and spoke softly with him for a moment. Then, behind his back, he showed a hand with three fingers outstretched.

Wan saw the movement, picked up her things, and headed upstairs. Finding room number three was easy enough. She opened the door and looked in. There was a momentary draft of air but, ignoring it, she stepped inside.

Another minute went by and Danny entered the room, closing the door softly behind him. As he turned, he put on his best smile for her.

Wan flung her arms around him and kissed him deeply. She was already fumbling for his zipper when he stopped her.

"Later, my pretty. First I want to know, were you caught? I was so worried you might be caught!"

"No darling, no one saw a thing. I waited for the Quidditch match when his room would be empty and snuck in then," she replied, her hands still working on his zipper. "It's been so long! I want you, and I know you must be ready to burst, you poor dear! Let me give you some relief."

"In a moment, my pet. I want to know, how long did it last? Did he suffer, has he fully recovered?" asked Danny.

"He screamed for nearly an hour. It was so funny! I don't know much about how he recovered because he's very secretive about what he can do. Those that know don't talk about it, except to say he's very powerful. Some say even more powerful than that fool Dumbledore," she replied.

"And are you still relaying my messages to your friends?" he asked, his breath deepening as she started to fondle him though his pants.

"Oh yes, Danny. They love hearing from you."

"Good, very good Wan. I'll try to get you more powder. If you have the chance to get to his salve again, take it and owl me. Understand?"

"Yes, yes. I understand," she said through her own gasps as she rubbed herself against his leg.

He sat on the edge of the bed and reached to fondle her breasts through her blouse. She moaned and knelt before him. She quickly opened his zipper and released him from his pants.

He stopped her. "I want you to prove your love to me Wan," he said fiercely.

"I'll do anything for you Danny, anything!" she moaned piteously.

He smiled at her. "Good my pet. I will owl you asking you to bring me a toy for our next meeting here. I think you will enjoy it. Do this for me and I'll have your ring with me next Hogsmeade weekend."

She nodded in acceptance of his demand, then she moaned in delight as he grabbed her head and guided her downwards.

Harry nodded to the guard behind Danny. He reached down and ripped the right arm from his shirt, revealing the Dark Mark of one in the service Lord Voldemort.

"This morning, Auror Tonks, we captured these two, with another student that I suspect was not there under her own free will. She was disheveled and very upset. Her clothing had been torn from her body before we arrived to capture these two."

Danny was shaking his head in denial. Wan was staring at Danny and his mark, her expression one of horror.

"Auror, the third student, Michele McGlover, is in the next room being attended to by Madam Pomfrey, Hermione Granger and Ginny Weasley. I have reason to believe she was intercepted on the way to town, and an Imperio curse was cast on her. Their wands are on the table. Check them if you wish."

Tonks walked over to the table and muttered a spell over each wand before picking one up.

"Whose wand is the Spruce, ten inches?" asked Tonks.

Dumbledore replied in a grave voice, "That would belong to Miss Wan Chang."

Tonks turned to Wan. "Wan Chang, I arrest you on the charge of casting an Unforgiveable curse," she said coldly. Tonks walked around to the back of the prisoners and placed them both in anti-apparation manacles.

"They're secured, Harry. Will you drop your anti-apparation ward please? We need additional Auror support," she said.

Harry nodded and dispelled the ward he had placed on the Shrieking Shack.

"Remus, would you kindly go to the Ministry MLE office and ask that two Aurors accompany you back here," asked Tonks.

Remus stood and apparated away.

Harry released the silencing charm from Wan.

"I expect you want to talk to her, Headmaster," he said quietly.

Wan's eyes darted in every direction, looking in vain for some friendly face, or a chance of escape. Ginny and Hermione came back into the room. The looks they gave Wan were as hard as stone and just as cold.

"Miss Chang, you are aware of what you've done this day?" asked Dumbledore, his voice filled with sorrow.

"H-H-Headmaster, I didn't know he was a D-D-Death Eater. I thought he loved me. He told me I was special!" She started to weep.

Madam Pomfrey walked into the room, her arm about a very pale Michele. Michele took one look at Wan and spat at her. "I hope you get the veil for this, you stupid blooder!" she screamed then collapsed against Madam Pomfrey crying.

Holding the weeping girl, Poppy looked at Dumbledore and Tonks. "She's still upset. I'd like to get her up to the infirmary Headmaster. Harry... Harry and his companions arrived before they could do anything more serious than frighten her," she said.

Dumbledore glanced at Tonks who nodded to him. "Very well Poppy, take her back to the castle. I'm sure someone will come by later to take a statement from her. Miss Granger, Miss Weasley, if you would be so kind as to help Madam Pomfrey with Miss McGlover?"

As the four of them passed Harry and Blaise, Michele reached out to both of them, touching their arms. "Thank you," she whispered.

Later that evening...

If Harry had known how much time today's little episode was going to take, he might have considered just dumping the information in the laps of the Aurors and forgetting about it.

It wasn't until nearly dinner time that all of the statements had been taken, wands checked, and the prisoners questioned. Harry and friends slowly trudged up the road from Hogsmeade to the castle. It hadn't helped when it was discovered that Danny was a Ministry employee who had been passing information to Voldemort for more than a year.

Harry now walked the silent halls of the castle. He knew he should have gone back to the common room and spent time with his friends, but he really couldn't. Not tonight. With the final battle less than six months away, he felt the sands of time pressing on him most keenly.

Danny's revelations had revealed plans within plans, some going back years. And he had only been preparing for a year and a half. The Ministry defense force was really shaping up under Moody, as was the Phoenix Brigade, but time was against them.

News of Wan's arrest had spread throughout the castle like wildfire. Many of the muggle born and half blood students breathed a sigh of relief, then asked that the brigade stop guarding them. Harry felt that it was a mistake to do so, but he couldn't get many of them to change their minds.

In a week or two, there would be a trial for Wan and her Death Eater boyfriend. More time wasted!

Slowly and not even knowing why, he made his way to the astronomy tower. Standing on the high, open platform, he looked out from the moonlit castle to the lake in the distance. The vista was peaceful and serene, but held little comfort for him tonight. In his mind's eye he could see the approaching army looming just over the horizon.

"Harry?" said a soft voice from behind him.

A faint smile flickered on his lips. How does she do that? "Hey Gin. Pretty night, isn't it?" he asked quietly.

She came up from behind him and wrapped her arms around him, holding him close. "What is bothering you Harry? Wan?"

He placed his own arms over hers. "Not just her or the war. I can feel him coming Gin. He's out there right now, massing his forces and I feel like I'm not doing enough about it." He pointed to the lights of Hogsmeade in the distance. "Look there. They have no clue that, in less than six months, war will rage through their community and come here. And it's up to me to stop it. Sometimes... sometimes I wish..." He trailed off.

"What do you wish? Tell me, please?" she asked him.

He sighed heavily. "Sometimes I wish I was just Harry, a normal person with normal problems. Even if I do manage to beat him, I'll never be able to show my face in public Gin. I'll be the Bloody-Boy-Who-Beat-Voldemort."

She turned him around and sat him down on one of the benches. Even in the darkness he could see her soft features framed by her hair.

"Harry," she started softly, placing her hands on his shoulders. "Is there anyone else you would trust to do this?"

He thought about that for a moment. "No, not really. Dumbledore can't do it, nor Remus, or even you or Ron. It's my job, I guess."

"You do this because you know there is no one else that can. You'll do it for all of the good people out there who've never heard your name and don't know anything about you, but will fall to Voldemort just the same if he wins. We both know Voldemort won't stop with Britain. And once it's over, you and I can start our life together, safe and happy. You won't hide Harry, because that's not who you are."

"I know you must feel like the weight of the world is on your shoulders, but you're concentrating on the wrong thing. Don't try to save the whole world. That's too much for one person to do. Save Erika, Eric and Jason. Save your family, friends and our future."

He smiled in the darkness and reached up to caress her cheek. "How did you ever get so smart, Miss Weasley?"

"Didn't you know, Mr. Potter? All of us Weasley's are smart. You told me that once," she replied.

Harry stood and kissed her gently, then wrapped an arm around her. Turning, they walked back to the common room together.

At the top of the tower, Albus Dumbledore stepped from the shadows. Very well done Ginevra, very well done indeed, he thought.

The next morning...

Harry got up early, wanting to explore the lower dungeons again. He planned to meet Ginny, Ron and Hermione for a trip into Hogsmeade later, but for now, he had some free time to burn, and that trap door was really bothering him.

Once in the closet, he stood over the trap door. He decided to cast a shield spell so the bats could exit, but couldn't reach him. He then opened the door with a levitation spell. Like before, the bats boiled out of the hole, but this time they couldn't get through the shield.

Bats! There were thousands of them. When most of them had exited the hole, he cast a containment spell and pinned most of the bats in a small area of the closet, away from the hole.

Dropping his shield, he was able to finally get a closer look at the hole. "Lumos Flotima," he uttered, causing a bright orb of light to appear.

Yes! There was a ladder built into the wall. He climbed down the ladder carefully, the light orb following him. At each rung, he carefully tested it with his weight. Most of Hogwarts was incredibly old and seemingly untouched by age, but this wasn't a time to be careless.

When he reached the bottom of the ladder, he stepped off into a long corridor that receded into the distance. Heavy iron doors were spaced on both sides of the passage at regular intervals.

He walked over to one of the doors and tried to open it, but it wouldn't budge. "Alohomora," he said, pointing at the door. There was a bright flash of light and he was thrown against the opposite wall.

"Well, that didn't work too well," he said groggily while leaning against the wall. He hesitated and decided not to try again. Returning to the ladder, he pulled out his sketchpad and made a quick sketch of the area. He'd show it to Dumbledore and see what he had to say about it.

Climbing up the ladder, he moved the bats from their containment back to the hole entrance. Closing the field slowly, they were squeezed back down the hole. Once done, he slammed the door shut.

Ministry of Magic, Courtroom Number 10, near the end of November...

"The prisoners will stand!" barked a bailiff.

Wan Chang and Danny Wong stood slowly. The manacles made it difficult for any fast movement.

Harry and a number of his Brigade sat in the gallery, having given their testimony two days earlier. They watched silently as the judges returned to the bench after having reached a verdict. This is what they had worked and waited for. None of them would have missed it.

"The prisoners will sit!" said the bailiff.

Amelia Bones stood off to one side. Daniel Wong's sabotage and leaks had done considerable harm to the Ministry. He was the one leaking information to Voldemort that gave the locations of muggle born families. He had been implicated in using his job to release many damaging cursed objects into the muggle world. He was also charged with attempting to murder Harry Potter twice, along with a long list of other charges. Amelia was angry. This was one of their own, a trusted member of the Government and she wanted to see justice done.

"The defendants, having been questioned under Veritaserum, and their stories corroborated by witness, have been granted every right and privilege our judicial system allows for. It is now time to read the verdicts," said the Head Judge.

"Daniel Wong, stand and hear our judgment."

One of the bailiffs poked Daniel. Sullenly he stood to face the judges.

"Daniel Wong," read the Head Judge. "You are charged with the following.

Being in league with the criminal known as Voldemort, GUILTY." A lot of people in the court room flinched as the name was mentioned. The judge ignored them and continued to read the verdicts.

"On the charge of committing espionage during a formal proclamation of Emergency, this court finds you GUILTY," the judge said. "On the charge of conspiracy to commit murder, this court finds you GUILTY. On the charge of kidnapping a minor, this court finds you GUILTY. On the charge of attempted rape of a minor, this court finds you GUILTY. Any one of these acts is sufficient to warrant death. Do you wish to make a statement before I pronounce sentence?"

"You may kill me, but Lord Voldemort will triumph!" he shouted.

One of the bailiffs cast a silencing charm on him.

"Is there anyone in the court wishing to make a statement of appeal for this individual before I pass sentence?" asked the Judge.

After a brief pause in which no one spoke, the Judge continued. "Very well. Daniel Wong, it is the judgment of this court that you be taken from this place and sent immediately to the Death Chamber where your execution will be carried out. Bailiffs, please remove the defendant, and may the Light have mercy on your soul, Daniel Wong."

Four bailiffs entered the court. One removed the shackle attached to the floor ring. They then dragged Daniel Wong, his eye's bulging in panic, from the room.

The judges waited until he had been removed before turning to Wan Chang. She stood without being prompted. Her eyes were fixed firmly on the floor in front of her, tears streaming down her face.

The Head Judge looked down at Wan sternly. "Wan Chang, you are charged with the following. On the charge of being in league with the criminal known as Voldemort, you are found NOT GUILTY. On the charge of conspiracy to commit Assault, you are found GUILTY. On the charge of kidnapping a minor, you are found GUILTY. On the charge of casting of an Unforgiveable curse, you are found GUILTY. Any one of these acts is sufficient to require jail time. Do you wish to make a statement before I pronounce sentence?"

She lifted a tear stained face to the judges. "I-I-I'm sorry. I was just doing what Danny told me to do. I thought he loved me, h-h-he lied to me," she said then broke down sobbing.

From the back of the court there came a disturbance. "WAN CHANG, SHAME! You've brought shame on yourself and our family!" screamed Cho Chang. Her family was holding her back as Wan collapsed to her knees.

The judge banged the gavel. "Silence! I will have silence in the court!"

After a moment, Cho's parents got her under control and she sat back down sobbing softly.

"Is there anyone in the court wishing to make a statement of appeal for this individual before I pass sentence?" asked the Judge.

A soft voice broke the silence in the room. "I do," said Albus Dumbledore from his seat up front. Gasps were heard throughout the court.

"The bench recognizes Albus Dumbledore. You may step forward and make your appeal," said the surprised Head Judge.

Dumbledore stepped before the bench, standing next to Wan. "My lords, before you is a child. She is but fifteen years old. She has been influenced by dark elements and swayed from the light, as surely as if she had been a victim of an Imperio curse herself. I would ask for leniency for this child, in the hopes that she may be turned from her path. I realize that you cannot allow her to go unpunished. I ask that her rights to magic be severely limited and she not be allowed full use of her wand until she turns twenty-one years of

age. In the interim, Hogwarts School of Witch and Wizardry would continue to instruct her, and work with her family, to insure she does not stray again."

When he was finished, he placed a gentle hand on Wan's shoulder. A murmur rose among the spectators. The judges conferred among themselves for a moment before turning to face the defendant again.

"Wan Chang, having conferred with the panel, and in light of your young age, we sentence you to fifteen years in Azkaban prison. However, in response to the appeal of the Headmaster of Hogwarts, we will suspend the sentence and remand you into the joint custody of your parents and Albus Dumbledore. Additionally, you are fined fifteen thousand galleons. Your wand will be turned over to your school and subject to periodic examination to make sure you are only casting spells appropriate for your school work. Any infraction from this point on and you will be sent to Azkaban, to serve the sentence imposed by this court on this day.

"Bailiff's, release the prisoner. This court stands adjourned." the judge finished.

Wan slumped to her seat, her face ashen. She couldn't bear to look at her family. Fifteen thousand galleons! That was so much money!

Dumbledore waited until the bailiffs had removed the manacles from Wan, then, still holding her by the shoulder, he scanned the courtroom looking to meet with her parents. He was very startled to see Harry and members of his brigade staring at him with open hostility. The magic pouring off Harry was noticeable, even from fifty feet away.

As a group they filed out from the courtroom to return to Hogwarts.

The common room, later that evening...

The common room was fairly busy when the door opened and Professor Sprout led an ashen faced Wan Chang into the room. A hush fell across the room as people turned to stare. She flinched under those stony looks. Professor Sprout led the girl up to her dorm room and left her there.

Disgusted with herself, and wandless, she sat down on her bed to contemplate the misery that had become her life. Next to her pillow was a parchment. Picking it up, she read, "We will be watching you..." It was unsigned.

Harry watched as Professor Sprout came back down and left the common room. Turning to Blaise, who sat nearby talking with Susan, he said, "I want you to pass the word. There will be no reprisals against Wan. I think the Headmaster is wrong in bringing her back here, but let's leave her be for now. Either she'll prove she's changed for the better, or she'll find a new way of hanging herself. I just don't want anyone to say we pushed her into it."

"Understood. I'll take care of it, Harry," Blaise replied.

Chapter 9 - A Spell on the Loose

Somewhere in England, Location unknown...

Voldemort was in a rage. With the loss of Daniel Wong, the Ministry had become a closed door. He no longer knew what was going on inside the Ministry, and it had become impossible for him to infiltrate it

again. It was rumored that the Ministry had resorted to using blood oaths to ensure employee loyalty and secrecy.

To make matters worse, the Ministry had sent only a few of his servants to the newly rebuilt Azkaban Prison. Most, thanks to new laws passed by the Wizengamot, had been sent directly to the veil.

"Summon Wormtail!" he snapped to a waiting servant.

A moment later the short squat man came scurrying into the room and bowed deeply before his master.

"I am your humble servant Master. What do you wish of me?" he whined.

"We have plans to make, Wormtail. If we cannot attack Muggleborns, then we will attack muggles instead."

"Also I wish you to speak to Oogla-Dain. Tell the Dain I will have need of him and his brethren shortly," Voldemort replied with a maniacal laugh.

Wormtail shivered in fear. Talking to the Dain was nearly as terrifying as talking to his master!

"I-I-It shall be as you command, Master," he whimpered.

Early December in Hogwarts...

With Wan's return to the school, things were strained. She would go to the Headmaster's office every morning to get her wand. After dinner, she returned to the office, where she would do her homework under his watchful eye, before turning over her wand to him for the night.

The Headmaster worked with her, trying to make her understand that ability, not blood, was important. After her sessions, she would return to the common room where a few friends would cluster around her, protecting her from the rest of the school.

A week into December, it was announced that there would be a Yule ball, open to fourth years and above. That news, and the fact that the attacks on the muggle born seemed to have died down, gave a sense of security to the school.

That wasn't to say that everyone in the castle was happy and serene. Harry had taken to late night walks in the castle and sometimes along the battlements of the outer wall. The stone rampart was impressive, thirty feet thick at the base, twenty at the top, the wall surrounded the castle and a few of the outlying buildings. Other parts of the castle grounds, like the Quidditch pitch, were outside the walls.

By some unspoken agreement, all of Harry's friends and teachers tried to make sure Harry always had someone with him on these walks. Many times he and Ginny would be seen walking the walls, other times it would be Dumbledore, Hermione, Ron, even Jack Parsons and both Professors Snape.

Harry was grateful for the company. Ginny always lifted his spirits and filled him with a renewed sense of determination. The others would talk about the progress they had made and discuss the plans and possible courses of action.

Tonight, he and Jack Parsons walked the battlements. For a long while they were both silent, walking the walls and examining the changes that were being put into place by the Weasley twins.

"Kid," began Jack, "I know what you're feeling. Would you like to talk about it?"

Harry looked at him curiously before replying. "I'm not sure I can, Jack. Every time I try to put it into words, it doesn't come out well."

They stopped and looked at each other. "Harry, let me try to do it for you then. Your guts are twisting into knots because you know you're going to send your friends and family into a horrific battle and some won't come back."

Harry blinked, then nodded mutely.

Jack sighed and leaned up against the crenel, his arms folded across his chest. "At Annapolis, they used to talk about the loneliness of command. That's what you're feeling now, Harry. In my old outfit we were like family, everyone looked after each other just like a family did, and we all grieved when we lost someone. But the leader, he's special, he's someone everyone else looked up to. It's a job I held and I know how lonely it can get."

"As the commander of the light, you have a tough job and perhaps it's unfair to place it all on your shoulders. But you're strong, Harry. I don't mean physically or magically. You have a strength and determination of character that inspires others. It's a lonely job to be a commander, but a good commander realizes he isn't truly alone. His command staff backs him up, makes decisions he would approve of, eases some of the burden he has to bear."

"You have a lot of good people trying to make things easier for you so you can concentrate on those tasks which you can't delegate out. You command a level of loyalty I've never seen before, except in the history books when you read about someone like Patton, or Lee or Montgomery."

Harry thought about that for a long time before replying. "I guess your right Jack. It's just that, every day it seems to get worse and the panic builds a little bit more. It's like studying for an exam and having no clue what the test will be about. You just know the exam is coming."

"Kid, the Brigade will be ready. So will the Ministry Defense teams. We'll hold the castle for you. All you should worry about is teaching old Moldywart how to crap out of the new asshole you're gonna give him!"

Harry stared at Jack for a long moment before he started to laugh. Moldywart indeed! When he finally regained some control he said, "Jack, one of these days I'm going to start writing down your sayings. Merlin, you sure know how to muck up the language! Did you hear Professor Sprout complaining about that song the students were singing the other day?"

Jack shook his head.

"Hmm, how did it go?"

Hogwarts plants are mighty fine,
But Sprout says they are all mine.
Get your weed from Pomona Sprout
She knows how to really put out!

Jack chuckled at that. "Yeah, I guess I'm sort of a bad influence on them. But look at how much fun they are having making up new ditties!"

Harry looked at Jack slyly for a moment. "Speaking of defenses, how are yours doing Jack?"

Jack looked at him in bewilderment. "What are you talking about Harry?"

"Well, I've noticed a certain Hestia Jones, Auror, taking more than a bit of interest in you. Why, I do believe you even dined with her in your quarters a few times last week."

"Kiddo, yer barkin' up the wrong tree. Those were business dinners. She just wanted to report to me on how the Ministry teams were shaping up."

"Jack, she could have owled you with those reports. The night I saw her, she was wearing her best Auror dress uniform. Most attractive, I must say."

Jack stood like a rabbit caught in the headlights of an oncoming car. "B-B-But I'm a squib!"

"Jack, you should know by now that makes no difference to us. One of my old house mates had a witch for a mum and a muggle for a dad. Even Tonks has a muggle for a dad. You could do worse Jack. She's a beautiful woman."

With that Harry walked off, leaving a stunned Jack Parsons standing on the battlements, contemplating a certain Auror who he had been seeing more frequently than business required.

Later that evening, Harry climbed into his bed. He was tired, but his mind was whirling with thoughts. Ginny entered a few moments later. She dropped the invisibility cloak on his table before climbing into the large bed and pulling the privacy curtain closed behind her.

She had joined him many times since start of school, but mostly they had cuddled and slept. She climbed under the covers with him, expecting him to be asleep or drifting off already, when he turned to her. His eyes cast a comforting green glow, clearly visible in the darkness.

"Your still awake? I expected you'd be asleep by now," she said quietly. She was about to say something more when she gasped as his hand flared with magic for a moment, before returning to normal.

He kissed her softly and it sent a thrill through her as she felt the sensation in a place other than her lips. She shuddered and pulled back from him.

"What did you do?" she demanded.

Harry smiled gently, and ran one hand along her cheek. She shuddered and her breasts quivered with sensation. "It's a sensory transference charm I invented, love. I made it so touching your face would transfer sensations elsewhere. I can teach you the spell if you want. It will only last twenty minutes or so, but I told you before, there are other things we can do besides soul binding."

She reached over to him and pulled him closer. "Teach me later, love. Right now I want you to kiss me," she whispered.

In a large magical castle in northern Scotland, two people shared their love despite the deepening gloom of a war that raged all around them.

Here and there...

Flight 72, bound for New York, had started in Paris. It landed at Heathrow Airport, London to take on additional passengers and to have the plane prepped for the overseas flight. One hour later, it took off again.

An hour after take off, the plane plunged into the Atlantic. There had been no radio contact informing the controllers that there was a problem onboard. It just dropped from the radar screens.

The 8:05 Brighton to Victoria station commuter rail left Salfords as usual. The driver noted the distinct drop in temperature as the train made its way into Earlswood. He checked the air conditioning settings, but everything seemed fine. A conscientious employee, as he pulled the train out of Earlswood he radioed for some mechanics to be ready to check the car when he pulled into Victoria Station.

Twenty minutes later the train plowed into the back of another train at Clapham Junction, having ignored traffic signals and the last four stops entirely. The train was traveling at nearly ninety miles an hour. Between the two trains, there were over eight hundred passengers involved.

Being muggle disasters, the magical community ignored them.

Grimmauld Place...

Tonks paced the room. Remus, already dressed for bed, sat on the edge of the bed and watched her. Since his cure, Remus had been to several medi-witches and wizards, but the general conclusion was that the lycanthropy had left him unable to have children. He could go through the motions, but like Jack Parsons would say, he was shooting blanks. And like Tonks, he had become quite attached to the Stonesmith twins. He wanted to adopt them as badly as Tonks did.

Children, a family, it was an impossible dream for a werewolf. He was an outsider looking in with longing when James married Lily and had Harry. He had expected to watch Sirius eventually settle down and have a family as well. Now he had a chance to have a normal life. Thanks to Harry curing his Lycanthropy, he had been able to marry Tonks. If she could see her way to making the right choice, they could have a family.

So now Remus watched Tonks as she paced the room. He had placed a silencing charm on the room. Tonks had a tendency to be quite vocal when she was upset.

"Damn it Remus, it's not fair! You and I both know those kids would be better off with us!" she said, glaring at him furiously, defying him to rebut her statement.

"Sweetie, I would agree with you, but you know my stand on this. They need a full time mother right now, especially Jason. Did you know he hasn't spoken in several years?" he replied calmly.

Tonks hair instantly grew from her normal bob to shoulder length and she pulled on it hard. "ARGH! Back to that! Why can't I have children and a career?" she said with a glare.

"Nymph, it's not that simple. We both know what's coming for Hogwarts in April. And as an Auror, you're going to be right in the middle of it. Do you want to bring those children into this house and become Mum to them, only to let them risk losing you?

When she flinched and said nothing in reply, Remus bored in for the kill. "They've already lost one set of parents. Parents, I might add, who didn't want them. Sweetie, I'm not saying you can't have a career, but you need to weigh your needs and theirs. They need a Mum and Dad. Molly and Arthur can give them that. You need to make a decision. I won't tell you what decision to make but I'll support what ever you decide to do. It has to be your choice," he said softly.

She turned to him. Her eyes filled with tears and, in a whisper, she asked, "Remus don't you want a family? Do you want those kids?"

Remus stood and walked over to her, his own eyes sad. He wrapped his arms around her. "Nymph, all my life I've wanted a family. I've wanted to love someone and be with them, have children and watch them grow up. I couldn't have any of that until Harry cured me. And now that I have part of it, I want the other part even more. So yes, I would love to bring them into our lives. Like Harry, I want a family to love and be loved by."

The two held each other for a long time before Tonks stepped away. "Perhaps I could go talk to Molly tomorrow," she mused aloud.

Remus smiled. She hadn't quite made her decision, but she was close.

Girls Dorm, the next day...

Hermione was sitting on her bed reading her favorite book, Hogwarts: A History, when Ginny came running in and bounced onto her bed. Ginny quickly pulled the curtains closed. Hermione looked at the younger woman curiously.

"Mione, you're not going to believe what happened," Ginny said with an evil grin.

"What? Good news I hope?"

"Last night Harry taught me a new charm he invented. I thought you might find its effects umm... interesting."

"Harry's creating charms? Since when?"

Ginny suddenly looked defensive. "Well you know his interest in bonds and charms. He's got a whole bunch of them at this point." She blushed, "A lot of his charms are designed to be used by couples, and there's a fair number of prank charms..."

She ground to a halt when she saw the look on Hermione's face. Hermione sat there fuming at Ginny. She had a look that said the Boy-Who-Lived was about to become the Boy-Who-Died-By-The-Bushy-Haired-Book-Witch.

"OH, BLOODY MERLIN! Hermione Granger, will stop that! He's not doing it to make you feel unneeded or stupid," Ginny said hotly.

Hermione looked suddenly sheepish.

"I'm sorry, Ginny. It's just that some times I can't get over how Harry is capable of doing things. For years he's been getting help from me. And then he creates major works, or invents new charms without spending a day studying spell creation. He's never even studied Arithmancy or Ancient Runes!"

"Mione, he's always going to need you. You know that. Look at what happened last year. He came up with some incredible works and forgot obvious things like Engorgio. So stop fretting, please? Besides, this is important. He taught me this new charm and I thought you'd want to learn it too."

There it was, out in the open. Hermione would never pass up learning a new spell, no matter how obscure.

Hermione closed her book and looked at the younger girl. "So, what does this charm do?" she asked.

"It's a sensory transference charm, 'Mione. Think of the fun you can have with it!"

Hermione gave her a puzzled look. Ginny giggled before saying, "Think of it this way. You can charm one area of someone's body so that a touch there will be felt elsewhere. You could touch Ron on his shoulder and make him feel it someplace else on his body."

Hermione sat there for a moment while all sorts of possibilities percolated through her head. Slowly, she smiled.

"Teach it to me," Hermione said with an evil grin.

Ginny grinned back at her. "It goes like this..."

The two girls sat for about twenty minutes, going over the charm. Neither of them noticed Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil creeping away from the bed with a huge grins on their faces.

By noon, most of the old Gryffindor girls, sixth year and above had learned the new charm. By dinner, it had spread like wildfire.

The Burrow...

Molly Weasley loved several things besides her family. She loved children, she loved helping others, and loved having people visit. She knew the Burrow wasn't an opulent mansion, but her home was neat and clean and, more importantly, it clearly said family to all visitors. So she was pleased when Tonks floo'd her earlier, asking if she could stop by around noon.

She didn't know the younger woman very well. Of course she knew her from the Order, and she had helped her plan her wedding. Tonks seemed so lost when it came to what Molly considered the important things. Yes, she was a very good Auror, and she was really good for Remus, but Tonks in the kitchen was a disaster.

Molly smiled when Tonks stumbled out of the floo. Some things never change!

"Hello Tonks," said Molly. "I'm glad you finally decided to visit."

Tonks picked herself up and smiled at the older woman, then she looked around carefully.

Molly eyed her for a moment. "Don't worry, he's in his room playing with some toys we had left over from the boys."

Tonks looked surprised that Molly had guessed her intent so easily, then she grinned. "Well, that's part of what I'd like to talk to you about Molly."

"I know why you're here Tonks, even if you're not quite sure about it yourself," Molly said with a smile. "But let's talk over a cup of tea in the kitchen, shall we?"

Entering the kitchen Tonks took a seat while Molly poured some tea she had simmering. Molly watched the younger woman struggle to find a way to put what she wanted to say into words and decided to cut right to the chase.

"Tonks, you want those children, but you're afraid that you don't know how to be a mother to them. You have a career that isn't right for a mother of young children and aren't sure how you can balance the two. Am I right?" she asked.

Tonks was surprised that Molly jumped right into the deepest end of the pool, but she wasn't surprised. Weasley's, from what she had observed, didn't believe in dancing around tough subjects.

"I do want them, Molly. I want them badly. Remus would so like to have a family, but we can't have children of our own. And then there's my career. I had hoped someday to head up the Auror division like Amelia, but Remus is right. Auror careers and kids don't mix well in war. And on top of that, we've become close with you and your family. I don't want to risk our friendship by trying to take them away from you," she said in a rush, throwing out excuse after excuse.

Molly placed her hand over Tonks'. "Dear, you and Remus are family and nothing will change that. We love having Jason here and look forward to Christmas with the twins. Our children are growing up fast. I would not be surprised if Ginny insists on marrying Harry this summer when she comes of age. What I'm trying to say is that you could petition for full parental rights, adopt them, with our blessings, or we can keep them. In either case, it's not going to change how we feel towards them, or you and Remus."

Tonks took in what Molly said and considered it. She still looked undecided though.

"Tonks, here's a suggestion. Why don't you stop by every day or two and spend some time with Jason and I. This will give you a chance to get to know him, and him to know you. It will provide me with some company and maybe I can even help you learn your way around a kitchen," she said with a smile.

"I think I like that idea, Molly," said the younger woman.

Hogwarts Great Hall, Dinner...

Harry sat at his usual table with Ginny. He really wasn't paying much attention as he flipped through pages of his notebook and continued to eat. Serena had joined them for dinner tonight, along with Blaise and Susan.

He looked up from his notebook when Ginny nudged him. Hermione was pointing at someone at another table, as part of her tale. He glanced over quickly and looked back in time to see her make a motion with her wand at Ron. He wasn't the only one to spot that little action. Serena also caught it. Seeing that Harry had spotted it as well, she turned to him, arching an eyebrow in question. He could only shrug in a bewildering reply.

A moment later, Hermione grabbed Ron's hand. It was typical of her. Ron was so busy shoveling food into his mouth he rarely noticed anyone until he was done eating.

Ron stiffened and turned beet red. He looked at Hermione, and then looked wildly about the table to see if anyone was watching them. Harry pretended to check his book again, but he watched the pair closely as Hermione ran a finger in circles around the palm of Ron's hand.

Ron's breath hitched a few times and, if possible, he turned even redder than he was. He reached down and carefully picked up his book bag and stood up while still holding Hermione's hand. Holding his bag in front of him, he looked down at Hermione and tugged her out of her seat. She had a knowing smile on her face as Ron dragged her from the Great Hall.

Harry watched the retreating backs of the couple, then scanned the hall. His eyes narrowed suspiciously as he noted that more than one couple, including Blaise and Susan, seemed to be engaged in activity that left one partner uncomfortably embarrassed. After another moment, Blaise and Susan left the table also.

"What in the name of Merlin is going on in here tonight?" asked Serena with a look of confusion, as couple after couple left the Hall.

"I'd say that someone, probably a red-headed someone," Harry replied looking at Ginny, "has been teaching people a new spell."

Ginny blushed and looked down at the table. "I only told 'Mione about it Harry! Honest!"

"Did you remember to cast a silencing charm before you told her, Gin?" he asked with a grin.

"I forgot," came the sheepish reply.

Harry laughed and leaned over to hug her. Looking back to Serena, he realized he better come up with some sort of explanation.

"Professor, let's just say that a spell I created... umm... got loose?" he finished lamely.

Ginny blushed again and laughed at his wording.

"And what does this spell do, Mr. Potter?" Serena asked, trying very hard not to smile.

Harry sighed. There was no way of getting around this one. He handed her his notebook. "The particular incantation and description is on page 87, Professor. It's better that you read it than me try to explain it."

Serena opened the book and found it was completely unreadable, she looked up at him curiously.

"Oh I forgot about that." He muttered an incantation under his breath. "There, now you're the only other person capable of reading that book besides myself. Eventually, I'll add Ginny here. But first I need to think of something suitable to do for letting that spell slip out. Maybe I'll turn her hair green for a week first," he said with a grin.

Ginny glared at him and was about to say something when he leaned down to whisper in her ear, "Or maybe I'll just make you spend the rest of your life with me instead."

Meanwhile, Serena watched as the pages in the book changed from symbols to letters. She was startled to find an index to the book. Combat spells broken down into defensive and offensive spells. General spells broken down into personal, love, child rearing, medical, business and wildlife? He's writing a book of new spells he's developed? There's over a hundred spells listed in here! Severus has got to see this, Dumbledore too she thought.

She turned to the page Harry had suggested and she quickly read through the spell description. Her eyes widened as she thought of the implications. She quickly memorized the incantation and wand motion, then considered making a copy of the book, since she had her wand, out tracing the movements of the charm. She was about to cast Replico when Harry stopped her.

"I wouldn't suggest doing that, Professor. The book is charmed with an anti-copy spell. If you try to copy that book, you may find the results...unpleasant...to say the least," he said with a smirk. "I learned my lesson last year. Many of those spells are ones I need personally. After April, I may consider letting others have copies, but not before. I can't risk them getting out."

Serena frowned at that. Here's a wealth of brand new spells and he won't share it! Merlin, he really should have been a Slytherin! She thought.

Suddenly Harry frown, his eyes flashed angrily. His skin glowed briefly. From across the hall, there was a shout that was not one of pain. Millicent Bulstrode stood shakily. She took ten steps before she let loose with another passionate scream, then she bolted for the door, her face flaming.

"Harry? Did you do that?" asked Ginny with a look of anger on her face.

Harry looked at Ginny after watching Millicent run from the room. "I didn't know it would bounce like that, Gin. All I know is someone cast that charm on me and I nullified it back to the caster. Alright, maybe I put a little too much power in that nullifying, but I don't like people casting on me without asking first," he replied.

Ginny blinked as she realized that Harry was responding to someone casting on him. Then she did a double take as she saw a faint shimmer appear around him. It was very subtle, barely noticeable. She probed that shimmer with her mind and was surprised by what she found. He had shielded himself against another unwanted charm!

Serena watched the two of them closely. She was as surprised as Ginny was by what Harry had done, and even more surprised by the full body shield he had just raised. Oh it was really low powered, and wouldn't stop a dueling spell, but it was strong enough to repel that charm of his.

Ginny fumed. She wasn't mad at Harry, but Millicent couldn't be allowed to get away with that. She decided she'd check with some of her friends later to seek advice on how to deal with old horse-face.

Serena decided she better change the subject. "Harry, how's the research into Godric's sword going?"

Ginny groaned and closed her eyes. She buried her face into her hands, "No don't mention the..."

Harry's hand shot out and snatched the sword from the air, then he grimaced. "Too late."

Serena looked surprised.

"Every time someone mentions the sword these days it appears. EVERY BLOODY TIME," he said vehemently. "Do you know what a pain it is? It's become a running joke in the common room."

"Dobby?" Harry called out in a loud voice.

With a pop, Dobby appeared next to Harry. "What can Dobby do for the great Harry Potter today?"

"Dobby would you return this..."

"Wait, Harry. I think you might be able to use Dobby," Serena interrupted, "Think about it, the house elves know even more about Hogwarts than the Headmaster."

Harry's eye's widened as what Serena told him sunk in. "Dobby, do you know how to make the sword stop appearing every time I think of it?"

Dobby vanished with a loud pop, then he returned a moment later with a scabbard for the sword. "Sword needs its holder, Harry Potter. That will keep the sword from appearing."

Harry took the scabbard from the little elf and looked at it carefully. Carved into the leather were the crests of all four founders of the school. He slid the sword into the scabbard and then he handed the sword to Dobby. "Would you return this to my dorm please, Dobby?"

"Anything for the great Harry Potter!" the little elf cried and he vanished with a pop.

Ginny giggled and Serena smiled. Harry turned to Ginny with a pained look. "You think it's funny now, but you do realize once I have a house of my own, he's going to want to come work for the Potter family. Him and Winky both," he said with a grin.

"Well, with all the children you think we'll have Mr. Potter, a little help would be appreciated," she retorted archly.

"We'll see. Oh Merlin, I'm going to be late my meeting with Jack. I'll catch up with you later," he said before standing up and hurrying from the Hall.

Snape's Private Quarters...

Serena Snape entered the apartment in a hurry. She had plans for this evening and she wanted everything in place before Severus arrived.

Rushing into the living room, she stripped out of her robe and tossed it onto a chair. Within minutes, she had a roaring fire going, candles lit and a bottle of brandy on the table. Hearing Severus enter, she smiled.

"Serena?" Snape called from the hallway.

"In the living room," she replied.

When he entered the room, she could see he was in a foul mood. She had a good idea what had caused it, but knew he'd tell her anyway.

"We have staff meeting tomorrow evening," he growled. "Dumbledore stopped me on my way to the Great Hall."

"I know. Minerva told me about it earlier today." She walked to him and helped him out of his robe. "I set out some brandy, knowing you'd probably need it," she said with a smile.

He kissed the top of her head absently and moved over to the couch. As he sat down, she went to the bar to get a glass. On her way back, she drew her wand, pointed it at his back and concentrated on his bum. Muttering under her breath, she cast the spell quietly and replaced her wand. Coming up behind him, she leaned over his shoulder and handed him the glass.

"Thank you," he said tiredly. Taking the bottle of brandy from the table, he poured a small amount into his glass, replaced the bottle and leaned back with a sigh. After a small sip, he relaxed a bit. "How was your day?" he asked.

"The usual," she replied, leaning against the back of the couch. "There were no major disasters and the castle's still standing. Anything interesting happen in Defense today?"

As he started to speak, she reached down and rubbed his shoulders gently. He jumped.

"What's wrong?" she asked, lifting her right hand.

"What? Oh, nothing," he said distractedly.

"You were saying something about your classes today?" she reminded him when he remained silent.

When he launched into an amusing story about one of his defense students, she replaced her right hand on his shoulder and began to knead the tense muscles she found there. He jumped once again and began to squirm. She stilled her hand, but didn't remove it.

"Severus? What's wrong?"

"Wrong? Nothing. At least, I don't think..."

His words trailed off when her hand started to move once more on his shoulder. He fidgeted under her hand for a moment, before leaping to his feet, nearly spilling the brandy from his glass. Turning around, he looked down at the couch with some suspicion.

"What is it?" she asked, looking down at the cushion in puzzlement.

"I could have sworn...I mean, I thought that maybe..." He growled in frustration, put his glass on the table and sat back down. "It's nothing. I'm just tired."

She grinned. "Relax," she said softly, running her left hand through his hair. "I know you don't like staff meetings, but you don't normally get this worked up over one. Did something happen in class?"

"No, nothing bad, at any rate. The students are coming along fine. As much as I love potion making, I loathed teaching it."

"I know," she said, placing her right hand on his shoulder once more and squeezed. He began to twist a little on the couch, shifting position like a guilty child found with his hand in the cookie jar. Serena bit her lip, trying not to laugh.

She increased the pressure of her right hand, stroking and massaging his shoulder. He squirmed and slipped lower on the couch.

"Severus, what are you doing?" she asked. "I'm trying to get you to relax and you keep squirming away from me."

He sat up and turned to stare at her suspiciously. Seeing her puzzled expression, he shrugged uncomfortably and raked the fingers of one hand through his hair. "It's the oddest thing..."

"What?"

"Never mind. I must be more tired than I thought," he muttered, leaning back once more and planting his feet deliberately.

"Poor Severus."

She kissed the top of his head and rubbed his left shoulder comfortingly. As he leaned into her touch, she lifted her right hand. The instant it touched his shoulder, he jumped, grabbed her hand and gave it a yank. Not suspecting his quick movement, she was unbalanced and spilled over the back of the couch to land partially in his lap in a rather undignified heap.

"Severus!" she squeaked.

"Did you think I wouldn't notice?" he growled. "All day long I've watched students do exactly what I've been doing. Squirming in their seats, twisting around at tables in the Great Hall."

She grinned up at him. "Oh, I knew you'd figure it out sooner or later. To be truthful, I thought it would be sooner though, spy that you once were. I thought you were supposed to be the observant type?" she asked impishly.

"Where did you learn that?" he asked, ignoring her jibe.

She told him about Harry's new notebook and the spell she'd learned. She also explained how the other students knew about it.

"That may explain the staff meeting tomorrow," Severus grumbled.

"Undoubtedly," Serena replied cheerfully.

Releasing her hand, he helped her to sit up. As he did so, his robe caught the glass on the table and tipped it over. The contents spilled to the floor, filling the room with the smell of brandy.

"I'll get it," Serena said. Pulling out her wand, she cleaned the mess and refilled his glass. Just before she turned to hand it to him, Severus tucked his own wand away with a satisfied smirk.

He took a sip of brandy while she curled up next to him. Taking her hand, he ran his fingernail down her palm and she jumped. When he repeated the motion, she jumped again and pulled her hand from his.

"Severus!"

"Did you think you were the only one to learn it, Serena?" he asked as he captured her hand once more. He laughed as she started to squirm. Setting his glass on the table, he turned to her. "This spell certainly has its interesting uses," he murmured wickedly.

Hogwarts Staff Meeting...

The room was chaotic. The staff was in an uproar over the recent behavior of their students. As the Professors argued over the cause, three people in the room looked on with varying degrees of delight and one person in complete embarrassment.

This was the first time Harry had attended a staff meeting, but he hadn't realized what it was about until he arrived. Taking Gryffindor courage and shoving it to the back of his mind, he opted to say nothing at all.

Serena and Severus Snape looked on in wry amusement. While they were not happy about what the results of the spell did to the concentration of their students, neither could complain too loudly. After all, they had fully enjoyed themselves last night, repeatedly casting it on each other.

Albus Dumbledore was also aware of the new spell. He had overheard a seventh year boy teaching it to his dorm mates while up on the astronomy tower yesterday. He was also aware of who the spell had come from, and the circumstances of its release into the general population of older students. While many of the teachers ignored base gossip, Dumbledore enjoyed it, as it reminded him of his younger years.

At a strident comment from Minerva, Dumbledore reined in his unruly thoughts and cleared his throat. "I do not believe that this new behavior will cause any harm. True, it will make classes a little more difficult for the staff, but I'm sure the novelty will wear off soon."

"Novelty? Novelty of what?" Minerva asked. At his slightly guilty look, she sent him a glare. "What do you know about this, Albus? I know you're hiding something."

"Perhaps, Minerva, but you will just have to trust me. The students behavior will return to normal in due time, I'm sure."

As the Deputy Headmistress continued to demand answers, Severus leaned over to his wife and whispered, "If last night is any indication, I think Albus is being a bit short sighted. I, for one, won't become bored anytime soon."

When Serena laughed, McGonagall whirled to face her. "You think this is amusing?"

"What I find amusing is your reaction, Minerva. Besides, the students aren't that bad."

"Not that bad!" Minerva exclaimed. "I'll have you know that, due to all the squirming and wiggling around, Miss Bones turned my desk into a twelve foot python because she couldn't aim properly!"

"So punish the girl for her inattention," Severus replied dryly. "Serena's right. The student's aren't that bad." When McGonagall opened her mouth, he stood up. "As we have nothing more to add, you'll have to excuse us. My wife and I have plans for this evening."

When Serena stood, Albus smiled and said, "Of course, my dears, of course. Enjoy yourselves."

"Thank you, Headmaster," Serena replied, noting that his blue eyes were dancing.

The door closed behind them, cutting off Minerva's shrill protest. Harry sunk lower into his seat and really wished he could follow the Snapes from the room.

Later that night in the common room...

Wan Chang sat in a corner of the common room, being ignored by most of the people there. She was working on a detention homework assigned by the Headmaster. It was a much subdued Wan these days. She still had a few friends that helped her when they could, but the last two weeks had been an eye opening experience for her.

Dumbledore had her working on a project with some researchers. Her job was very minor at best. She was to organize their raw data and put it into some semblance of order. The research project, run from St. Mungos, was looking into the comparative power levels of full bloods vs. non-full bloods. The raw data was strongly leading her to a conclusion she did not want to come to.

While Wan was certainly no friend of the muggle born or half bloods, she was seeing from the data in the project that if something weren't done, the full bloods would be without magic in ten or so generations. They were breeding it out of themselves.

One thing was clear to her. After seeing Harry Potter take down Danny without a wand, she was quickly coming to the conclusion that she did not want to be on the side against Potter.

She had told her 'friends' exactly that, and they had laughed at her fears. So now, except for a few true friends, she found herself ignored by most students.

Here and there...

Manningtree, Essex, where Mathew Hopkins began his famous career as Witchfinder General in the 17th century, was a small town. In fact, it was one of the smallest in England. Now days it remained a popular spot for history buffs and tourists to visit, but had retained its old world charm despite its sordid past.

Mr. Oxbridge was out walking his dog and, being winter, never really noticed the drop in temperature until it was too late. The Dementors floated across the river Stour and into the town, administering the kiss to everyone.

By mid morning, local authorities, realizing they had a problem, sealed off the town and were sending medical teams in to investigate. Not a single soul had escaped the kiss in Manningtree.

The Common Room...

The Yule ball was upon them. Tomorrow they would be heading home for the holiday break. The older students were excited, rushing around and preparing for the dance ahead.

Harry checked his robe once more, giving it a nervous twitch. Ginny had insisted on him selecting a lighter color robe for this occasion, so tonight he wore a green robe with a black trim. Unexpectedly, Gladraggs had also added the Potter family crest in silver over the left breast of the robe.

Colin was making the rounds of the Dorm rooms making sure those who wanted photos would be ready. Like last years ball, a group of boys had pitched in to buy Colin plenty of film for his camera.

The Common Room was crowded tonight and Harry was surprised to see so many of the younger students still there. Normally on dance nights, they tend to vanish up to their rooms.

Erika came up to Harry, with Eric right behind. She looked him up and down approvingly as if to say, "Even if Ginny doesn't approve, I do."

"Are you really going to dance with a girl, Professor Harry?" asked Eric. Being a boy of only eleven, he made the word girl sound like it was some dirty object to be avoided at all costs.

"Of course, Eric. I danced with Erika, didn't I?"

"But she my sister. That's different!" Eric protested.

Erika shot her brother a glare. "Well I think Professor Harry is an excellent dancer, Eric. And he's not afraid of girls like some people I know!" she said with a sniff.

Harry grinned at the two of them.

Straightening up, he spotted Ginny coming down the stairs. What he saw took his breath away. Ginny's robe molded to every part of her body. Her hair was done up in wonderful curls. Most importantly, the look she gave him smoldered with a love and a challenge, and he knew it was for him and him alone.

He took one of her hands in his and caressed her cheek with the other. "Your so beautiful Gin, so perfect." he said softly to her, his eyes drinking her in.

Ginny could see from his reaction that all her work hadn't been in vain. She smiled up at him and stood on her toes to kiss his cheek.

After getting their photo taken by Colin, they said good night to the twins and made their way to the Great Hall. Professor Flitwick had enlisted Harry's help in decorating the Hall in a holiday mood.

The room had been expanded and, off to one corner, was a huge decorated Christmas tree. A small stage had been set up for the band. The Weird Sisters had been unavailable so, this year, a new band called the Dancing Dragons had been brought to the castle. The walls had been charmed to make it seem like the entire room was a giant cloud, floating lazily over a snow-covered landscape.

Harry and Ginny took up seats at a table with Ron, Hermione, Neville and Luna. The last couple to join them was Blaise and Susan. Like previous balls, this one started with a dinner.

The teachers had a special table reserved for them up at the head of the Hall. En masse, they entered the Hall and headed for their table. They were all dressed in their best robes. As soon as they were seated, there was a bright flash of light from their table. When the light receded, they found themselves drastically changed.

Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall were dressed as Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus, down to appropriate potbellies. The rest of the teachers, except for Flitwick who actually grew taller, were shrunk in size and dressed as Santa's elves. Flitwick was delighted with his new height!

Harry watched for a moment as the rest of the hall erupted into laughter. "Mischief Managed," he murmured with a slight smile on his face.

Ginny, overhearing this, slapped his arm. "You're supposed to include us!" she said.

"Did you include me when you went after Millicent, Gin?" he retorted with a smile. "Although to be honest, I'm not sure I'd want to be included when twenty girls gang up on another. And how long will it take before the 'I will not touch Harry Potter' fades from her forehead, anyway?"

"Another week or two," Ginny replied with a shrug. "Besides, she asked for it with she did to you. I made that plain last year and Millicent needed to be reminded of that."

The two turned back to the head table as Santa Dumbledore stood up. A hush fell across the Hall. His eyes were twinkling merrily as he looked out over the students. He hooked one hand in his wide leather belt.

"Ho ho ho! Well, it seems that one of Santa's elves has, ho ho ho, been playing tonight, ho ho ho!"

As he talked, his belly shook like crazy. Most of the full bloods didn't have a clue why he was acting so strange, but the muggleborn and half bloods were quickly filling them in.

After dinner, the Dancing Dragons began to play. Harry was surprised and pleased to see Ron immediately lead Hermione onto the dance floor. He followed with Ginny.

As they danced, he noticed one teacher had arrived late, and not alone. He smiled seeing Jack escort Hestia Jones into the Great Hall. Jack looked extremely uncomfortable in a Wizarding robe. At one point in their dance they came close enough to talk with the pair.

"Not a word about the pajamas kid, or I'll run your butt off next time I see ya," growled Jack to Harry.

"You look good, Jack. Very wizardish," replied Harry with a smirk.

Santa Dumbledore made his way through the crowd, handing out small packages to people as he passed them. He seemed to have a charmed sack that never emptied. He had a pained expression on his face as he handed Harry and Ginny their presents.

"Ho ho ho! I hope you like your presents! Ho ho ho!" he said, before shuffling off to hand out more presents.

"THANKS Santa!" Harry shouted after him.

Harry started to snicker. Ginny looked at him with suspicion. "Just what have you done Harry? What's in these presents?"

"Just watch Hermione. When she opens the present, you'll know by her reaction. In fact, let's head back to the table. They should be there shortly."

He led her back to their table for a drink. When the current song ended, every one returned to their tables to check out their presents. Harry sat back with a huge grin on his face as Hermione ripped open her gift. She took one look inside the box and groaned. She then leaned over and banged her head repeatedly on the table top.

Ginny opened her present, then eyed Hermione and started to laugh. Santa was giving everyone lemon drops this Christmas! As one, those in the Hall turned to look at Hermione and erupted into laughter.

Hermione continued to pound her head against the table as she turned beet red. Harry had managed to prank both her and the teachers in a single shot.

As the last dance of the evening started, Harry led Ginny onto the dance floor again. He held her close to him, reveling in the feel of holding her.

"It's getting closer, you know," he whispered in her ear.

She looked up at him startled. How could he talk about Voldemort now? she thought angrily.

"I'm really looking forward to it too, Gin," he whispered.

"What are you talking about?" she asked, angered by his comments.

He blinked at her reaction. He didn't think she'd be angry! "I'm talking about when we'll be able to get married. What did you think I was talking about?" he asked perplexed.

Her features softened immediately and she hugged him tightly before smiling up at him. "It doesn't matter, love. And yes, I'm looking forward to it as well. I think I'll like being Mrs. Potter very much," she replied losing herself in his sparkling green eyes.

He bent down to kiss her and, like last year's dance, his magic enveloped both of them. Overhead, a pair of stars shot across the heavens and, for a brief moment, one could hear phoenix song mixed in with the music from the band.

As the song ended, he wrapped an arm around her shoulders and they made their way to the exit. She smiled at him. "You know Mr. Potter, you have an absolutely wonderful way of ending a dance."

"It's the company, Miss Weasley. It wouldn't be possible without you."

No one wanted to point out that both of them had a slight glow around them as they exited the Great Hall.

Home for the Holidays...

The trip home from Hogwarts was uneventful for the most part. Harry, Ron and Ginny had spent some time reassuring Erika and Eric that they would be welcome in their home. And Molly made a big fuss over them when they arrived in Kings Cross station. They needed to take two taxis from the train station where they'd floo from the Leaky Cauldron to the Burrow.

The plans for Christmas this year were different. They would spend Christmas morning at the Burrow and have Christmas dinner at Grimmauld Place.

Harry watched the twins as they eyed the floo in the Leaky Cauldron. They had never traveled by floo before and weren't too sure about it. Harry offered to take them through, right behind Molly, Ginny and Ron.

Taking each by the hand, the three stepped into the fireplace. Harry nodded at Erika to throw the floo powder and he shouted, "The Burrow!"

In a flash of green flame they vanished.

A moment later they stepped out of the floo at the Burrow. Erika and Eric squealed and broke from his hands when they spotted Tonks standing with Jason. Harry smiled. The three of them had managed floo traveling without falling!

On the heels of that thought, Harry was knocked to the floor. He looked up in indignation at Ron.

"What the bloody hell did you do that for?" he asked hotly.

"Can't have you not tripping when you come out of the floo, Harry. It's just not natural," he replied with a huge grin before offering him a hand up.

Molly took the twins in hand and showed them to their new bedroom, which Remus had built into the house. Jason followed close behind.

"Tonks, I'd like to talk to you in a bit. Give me a moment to go upstairs and change, then I'll meet you in the kitchen, alright?" Harry asked.

She nodded at him absently while watching the twins and Jason from the hallway.

Changing into more comfortable clothes, Harry met up again with Tonks in the kitchen. The twins and Jason were in their room. Molly poured Harry and Tonks a cup of tea before pouring one for herself and sitting down.

"I know you two are still trying to figure out what's going to happen to the twins and Jason. It's not my place to get involved in that. But what I would like to do, with permission from you both, is take the three of them, with Ginny, to Diagon Alley tomorrow so they can do some Christmas shopping. I'll give each of them a

small amount of money so they can buy presents for each other and whomever they want. I'd just like the three of them to have a good, fun Christmas. I suspect it will be a first for them this year," he concluded.

Tonks and Molly looked at each other. "I don't know, Harry. The twins would be ok, but Jason is awfully young. I think I'd feel better if an adult went along," replied Molly. Harry blanched at that.

"Molly," Tonks said softly, "Harry is an adult now and Ginny will be in less than a year."

Molly turned pale. "Oh Harry, I'm so sorry. I can't help but think of you as just one my children." She reached over and pulled Harry into one of those bone crushing hugs he loved to get from her.

"It's alright, Molly. If it makes you more comfortable, I'll ask Remus if he can join us tomorrow?" he offered with a smile to show he understood how she felt.

Harry got up to go floo Remus when Molly grabbed his hand. He looked at her curiously, "Harry I'm..."

"Molly, it's alright, really. For most of my life, I didn't have a Mum there to care about me. It feels good to know I have one now," he said, interrupting her.

"Harry," Tonks broke in, "I'll ask Remus to join you tomorrow, say about 10am in the Leaky Cauldron? In the meantime, why don't you go visit the twins and Jason and let them know about the shopping trip?"

Harry nodded and left the room.

Molly turned to Tonks. "I can't believe I said that! If that had been Ron or one of my other boys they would have screamed their heads off."

"Harry isn't like your other boys, Molly. He's a man in so many ways that matter. But he's never had the kind of love your boys have had, so he's still willing to accept it, where Ron and the others wouldn't," replied Tonks. Then she smiled. "I think that long after Ginny is grown and has kids of her own, Harry will still accept a little bit of mothering from you."

Molly smiled wistfully at the idea.

Diagon Alley the next day...

Remus met Harry, Ginny, the twins and Jason at the Leaky Cauldron the next morning. Remus had been visiting with Jason when he could break away from his schedule, so Jason knew him pretty well. Well enough to take his hand when he arrived.

Harry turned to the children. "Alright, here's what we're going to do. First, we're going to Gringots, the wizard bank to get some money. Then, you're each going to get fifty galleons to buy Christmas presents."

All three kids look up at Harry wide eyed and nod as one. Ginny, watching them, tried to stifle a laugh. With that, they all marched out of the back entrance of the Leaky Cauldron and into Diagon Alley.

Heading straight to Gringots with everyone in tow, Harry asks one of the goblins if Griphook is available. A few minutes later, another goblin appeared.

Harry gave the goblin a toothless smile. Everyone knew that showing your teeth to a goblin was a deadly insult. "Griphook! It's so nice to see you again. I trust everything is well with you?" Harry asked politely.

"I am well, Mr. Potter. Thank you for asking. How can I be of service to you today?" asked Griphook.

"Griphook, I'd like you to meet three dear friends of mine. I'd like to open three trust accounts in their name for their education. Set the accounts up with fifty thousand galleons apiece, with a five hundred galleon personal allowance per year 'til they graduate. Please withdraw the money from one my vaults to set it up."

Remus grabbed Harry by the arm and hissed, "What in the name of Merlin are you doing, Harry?"

"I'm ensuring for their education. This way they'll have the money they need for school," Harry whispered back. "Remus, if the Weasleys keep them, then the extra money will pay for their education. If you take them in, they are still covered."

Remus fumed for a moment, then said, "Griphook, take an additional fifty thousand from my account for each one of theirs, please."

The goblin looked at the two of them then nodded. "Of course, Mr. Lupin. If you will give me a moment, I shall prepare all the paperwork and bring them their keys." At their nods, Griphook disappeared into a back room.

"You're getting too damn smart, Harry. I was planning to do this after the holiday!" Remus growled at him, then smiled to show he wasn't really angry.

A moment later, Griphook came out with three keys and a handful of papers. He had each child sign the paperwork, then asked Harry and Remus to sign as trust managers. Finally, he gave each child his or her vault key.

"Will that be all for you today, Mr. Potter?" asked Griphook.

"No, Griphook. Would you be so kind as to bring us three money wallets with fifty galleons each please, and charge it to my account?" replied Harry.

Griphook reached into a drawer and pulled out three enchanted money wallets. Murmuring an incantation over them, he then handed them to Harry. "Each one now contains fifty galleons, Mr. Potter."

Harry took the wallets and put them in his pocket. "Thank you, Griphook. As always, your assistance has been invaluable."

"One more thing before you leave, Mr. Potter. I meant to owl this to you today, but since you're here, Director Ragnot has asked that I give you this," he said as he handed over a sealed envelope.

Harry raised an eyebrow at Griphook, who smiled back toothlessly. Harry put the envelope in his inner jacket pocket. "Thank you, Griphook. Please convey my regards to Ragnot. I hope you both enjoy the upcoming festival of Ookmar."

Griphook's eyes widened and he bowed low. "Thank you, Mr. Potter."

Upon exiting Gringots, Remus stopped them. "Harry, how did you know about Ookmar?" he asked.

"After my last trip to Gringots I thought it would be best to read up on the Goblin culture," he replied with a shrug. "Now, let's get our shopping done then we'll go back to the Burrow. I'm curious to find out what's in the letter from Director Ragnot,"

They spent a good deal of the day shopping. Harry picked up a couple books and a miniature Quidditch game at Quality Quidditch supplies for Jason. Ginny played 'distract the six year old' while those purchases were made. In fact, all of the adults at one point or another played distract the child while another made a purchase.

By mid afternoon they were set to return to the burrow when Harry handed Ginny some galleons and told her to buy them lunch at the Leaky Cauldron. He said he forgot one item and needed at least thirty minutes.

He returned nearly fifty minutes later, looking very pleased with himself. In moments, the group was spilling from the fireplace at the Burrow.

The Burrow...

Remus, Harry and Ginny went into the kitchen while Tonks took the children into the living room to help them wrap their gifts. Harry pulled out the letter from Director Ragnot and opened it while everyone waited expectantly for him to read it.

Mr. H. Potter,

As you are no doubt aware, the Goblin nation is not without its own resources when it comes to magical capabilities. Our seers have learned of a plot against Hogwarts sometime in early April of next year. As you were instrumental in bringing about our recent successful cooperation with the Ministry of Magic, we are prepared to offer a Goblin Brigade to assist you in your cause.

You may not be aware, but a Goblin Brigade consists of two hundred and fifty Goblins. All we ask in return is that you personally appeal to the Minister of Magic for a re-negotiation of the current treaty between the Goblin Nation and the Ministry of Magic, allowing us to enjoy a greater degree of equality within the Wizarding world.

I eagerly await your reply in this matter.

Respectfully,

Ragnot, Director of Gringotts.

Harry turned ashen before finishing the letter. "Remus..." he said softly.

"Harry, what's wrong! You're so pale!" cried Ginny.

"Remus, floo Dumbledore. Tell him I need him here right now and if there is any way he can swing it, to get Amelia to join him," Harry said more forcefully.

Remus blinked in surprise and rushed to the floo.

"It's ok, Gin. It's just that it's not everyday that one sees history made by a simple letter," Harry said to her with a smile.

A short while later Remus walked into the kitchen with Dumbledore and Amelia Bones, both of who appeared to be confused and surprised by the impromptu meeting.

"Harry, it's good to see you, although I am somewhat surprised. Remus said you received another message from the Goblins?" asked Amelia.

Harry handed her the note. Remus and Dumbledore both read it over her shoulder. When they were done, they all sat heavily in chairs and just sat staring at the letter in Amelia's hands.

Molly walked in and was shocked to see that Dumbledore and the Minister of Magic were sitting in her kitchen. She quickly started pouring tea for everyone. Then she took a seat, wondering why everyone had a stunned look on his or her face.

Amelia finally broke the silence. "Harry, have you ever considered a career in Government? At this point I think the position of Minister would suit your talents," she said with a smile.

Remus shook his head in wonder. "I would have never believed it if I hadn't read it myself. A Goblin Brigade!"

"Yes, it is quite a tempting offer. The power behind a Brigade would be most welcome," replied Dumbledore.

Amelia handed the note back to Harry who handed it to Molly so she would understand what they were talking about. Ginny read it over her shoulder, her own eyes widening.

"Minister, my question to you, since Ragnot seems to be expecting me to reply personally, would be are you willing to re-negotiate the treaty?" asked Harry.

"Harry, for a Brigade of Goblins I'd be willing to give them the keys to my office!" Amelia declared.

"Good. Should I send Ragnot a note asking if he'll accept Remus as negotiator for the new treaty?" asked Harry.

"Excellent Harry, excellent! Now, while you write that letter, perhaps Molly will provide us with a slice of that wonderful pie she has cooling," Dumbledore said with a twinkle. Molly quickly got up and started serving.

As Harry started to scribble a note on a piece of parchment, Ginny took it from him. "I swear Harry, for someone who wants to be a teacher, you have the handwriting of a healer! Give me a clean sheet and I'll make this neat and you can sign it," she said.

He looked sheepish. His handwriting wasn't really all that good. Signing the clean copy of the letter Ginny produced, he handed it over to Remus to take to Ragnot.

"Remus, as my portfolio manager, I'd like you to do me one more favor please," Harry said.

"What's that, Harry?" he replied.

"Would you pick up fifty thousand more shares of DLPH for me?" Harry asked.

"It's not a very good stock Harry, but if that's what you want, I'll take care of it," replied Remus.

Amelia looked up from the pie she was enjoying and squinted at Harry. "DLPH, Harry?"

"Let's just say I'm planning a surprise for someone Minister, and I daresay it's not going to be a pleasant one," Harry said with an evil glint in his eyes.

Amelia and Dumbledore exchanged a worried look for a moment. Dumbledore finally shrugged. There really wasn't anything they could do about it.

Tonks walked into the room carrying Jason in one arm and leading Erika and Eric by a hand. She seemed startled to see the Minister there. Amelia looked at the young Auror with the kids and raised an eyebrow in question.

Tonks handed Jason to Molly and grabbed a sheet of parchment and a quill from in front of Harry. Scribbling a quick note, she folded it and handed it to the Minister.

"Minister, would you be so kind as to deliver that note to Kingsley Shacklebolt, please?"

Amelia opened the folded parchment and quickly read it, her breath hitching in surprise. "Auror Tonks, you're resigning from the force? Now? When we need every Auror we have?" she exclaimed.

Tonks sat down next to Harry, who was sporting a huge grin. Molly handed Jason back to Tonks. "Yes Minister, I am. Effective immediately I'm afraid."

"I have a right to know why, Auror Tonks," the minister said formally. She was obviously upset. She truly liked Tonks and thought she had a great future in the Auror division.

"Minister, these children," she said, pointing to Jason, Erika and Eric, "need a family, a mother and a father. Their parents, in the last major attack against muggleborns, abandoned them. The twins are metamorphs, like myself. I'm the only one that can train them in their abilities. And finally, my husband and I want a family and we cannot have children of our own."

None of the children, or Molly for that matter, seemed surprised by this. While the adults had been discussing goblins and politics, Molly and Tonks had been talking with the kids in their room.

The Minister looked at Tonks, noting her defiant look and decided to try for a compromise. She could understand what Tonks was saying. She too had once been forced to decide between career and family and had picked a career over the two.

"Auror, how about if I advise Kingsley to put you on the inactive roles for now? That would mean you can come back to the force when your smallest child goes off to Hogwarts," she offered.

Inactive status would mean taking refresher courses if I return to the force, thought Tonks. And I would still be allowed to maintain my Auror status. It's better than resigning, plus I don't have to return to the force unless I want to.

"Alright, Minister. Inactive status will do. It's more than I had hoped for, actually," Tonks replied with a sigh of relief.

Amelia smiled, saying, "I'll also inform the Office of Child Placement to expedite your request to adopt these children, Tonks. May I be the first to congratulate you on your new family?"

Tonks nodded, smiling. With tears streaming down her face, she hugged Jason to her. Remus went over to the twins and grabbed them both in a hug. Both Molly and Ginny had tears in their eyes, while Dumbledore looked on, nodding his own approval.

Later that evening over dinner, it was decided that Jason, Eric and Erika would stay with the Weasleys until Christmas day. That would give Remus and Tonks time enough to prepare rooms for them. Erika seemed to be most concerned that she wouldn't be Professor Harry's little sister, but he assured her that she always would be.

Everyone was surprised when Jason reached for his cup and, when he couldn't reach it, he performed a bit of accidental magic and summoned it. No one had managed to get Jason to talk as of yet, but Remus was going to give him some time to become adjusted, and then, if necessary call in a mind healer to help him.

Fred and George had stopped by for dinner and were totally taken by the twins. Eric and Erika seemed to be battling for control of their link all through dinner. First, they had short hair, and then it would grow long again, much to the delight of the Weasley twins, who were so busy laughing they barely managed to choke down anything for dinner.

Eric, sitting between Fred and George, and with a little couching from Harry, had been carefully placing spoonfuls of mashed potatoes in their pockets whenever they were distracted by their own laughter. This little prank probably would have gone undetected for quite some time, but Eric had decided that one couldn't have potatoes without gravy!

Fred was the first to notice something wet in his pocket. He leapt to his feet in concern.

"OY! Whose been messing in my pocket?" he shouted.

George started laughing at Fred, until he realized that he too had something wet and warm in his pocket. He looked up at his brother in consternation.

"Brother mine..." George started.

"...I do believe..." Fred continued.

"...we've been pranked..." George exclaimed.

"...by the next generation of Marauders!" Fred finished.

Eric, being barely a Marauder apprentice, hadn't learned that valuable lesson of feigning ignorance. He immediately started giggling, which set off Erika and Jason.

"You do realize these three are going off to live with a Marauder, right? In a few years time, these three may be able to put you two out of the prank business," Harry said with a smirk.

"No, Harry. What we see..." started Fred.

"...is raw talent that must be..." continued George.

"...trained and brought up right!" finished Fred.

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...

Jack Parsons walked the battlements alone. In his own unique way, he was feeling almost as much pressure as Harry. Under his guidance, the Phoenix Brigade and the Ministry Defense teams were really shaping up into fine units. That wasn't what bothered him. What bothered him was a very simple fact. Although he had spent most of his adult life in training for battle and training others for battle, for once he was training young men and women who would go into a battle he couldn't fight. It was a battle that was beyond his ability to participate in. It was an alien feeling.

And then there was Hestia. She was a witch, an Auror, a very attractive woman and only a few years older than Tonks.

He sighed and leaned against the crenel, looking out over the Quidditch pitch. His eyes were open, but not really seeing, as he got lost in his own thoughts and emotions.

"What troubles you, Professor?" asked Dumbledore, coming up behind him soundlessly.

Jack spun on his heels to face the Headmaster in surprise. Instinctively he ducked into a crouch.

Dumbledore smiled faintly, looking at him over his half moon glasses. "I assure you Professor, I mean you no harm," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

"I'm sorry Headmaster, I didn't hear you coming up behind me," began Jack.

Dumbledore held up a hand stopping him. "No harm done Professor, but what troubles you? I can feel your disquiet."

Jack eyed the older man for a moment. "A bunch of things are bothering me, Headmaster. I know war, and I served in Grenada, Panama, Kuwait, Iraq and a few other places no one is supposed to know about. I guess I dislike having to sit this one out. I can teach these young men and women of yours to fight, but when the fighting starts and I can't be there, fighting along side them. It's a diminishing feeling, Sir. It makes one feel... useless."

"Professor, that is so far from the truth. You barely know us or our beliefs. We are a simple people really, relying on magic to do what the muggles do with technology. Every one of the men and women who go into this battle will carry a piece of you with them. They will carry your knowledge and your spirit. That is why being a Professor is a very prestigious job in our world. We believe that, in the process of teaching, we share ourselves with our students.

"You have taught and imparted of yourself to not just Hogwarts students, but to Ministry employees as well, Professor. And you have done so at great personal risk to yourself in a time when muggles and squibs are in great danger. I have watched you closely these past months, and I admit that I have liked what I've seen. You've revitalized the school with fresh ideas and attitudes, and treated everyone equally. I'd like for you to consider staying on at the end of the school year. I have come to see the need for physical training for our students and I do believe our teacher for Muggle Studies wishes to retire at the end of this term," Dumbledore concluded with a smile.

"I think I'd like that, Sir. There is a kind of peace here, as weird as this place is. And believe me, this place is weird. But something about it says home to me," Jack replied.

"Excellent, Professor. And now, I do believe a certain Miss Jones has come to enjoy your company again. Please give her my regards," Dumbledore said, pointing to the gates.

As Dumbledore walked off, Jack turned to watch the figure approaching from the gates with a smile.

The Burrow the next morning...

Harry was outside helping Eric and Erika get more comfortable on a broom. They were only hovering at this point, but both were uncomfortable with heights. Ginny was in Harry's room looking for an old blanket that Molly wanted when she stumbled across a cache of paperwork in his closet. Curious, she looked over some of the papers. Mostly it seemed to be financial related material and some correspondence. She stopped when she came across what appeared to be a very early draft of his will.

With a trembling hand she placed everything back where she found it and left his room. Going downstairs she found Molly in the living room. Molly looked up as her daughter entered the room.

"Ginny dear, what is it? You're so pale!" Molly exclaimed, jumping to her feet.

"Please Mum, not here. Can we floo to Grimmauld for a bit? Tonks is here and Harry is with the twins, so they're alright," she replied, her breath hitching in as she mentioned Harry's name.

Placing an arm around her daughter, Molly walked over to the floo and took them both to Grimmauld Place.

When they arrived, Molly was surprised to see that the Hermione, the Grangers and Remus were sitting in the living room talking. At that point, what little control Ginny had left collapsed and she clung to her mother, weeping.

Hermione and Remus jumped to their feet wondering what was wrong. Molly assured them that nothing was wrong back at the Burrow. Molly steered Ginny over to a couch where Hermione joined them. Remus went to go get a calming draught from the Order's supply of potions. With a bit of coaxing, they finally managed to get her to drink the draught. She began to calm down, although her eyes continued to shed tears.

"Ginny, tell me what's wrong," Molly asked gently.

"I was looking for that blanket like you asked. I couldn't find it, so I went to check in Harry's closet. I didn't find the blanket, but I did find a copy of his w-w-will," she replied. Her eyes were squeezed tight. "It all came crashing down on me at that point."

Hermione's eyes also started to tear up. She grabbed Ginny's hand and squeezed.

Remus knelt before the three of them. "Ginny, Harry didn't make that will because he expects to die, sweetheart. He made it because, when you have the kind of wealth like he does, you need to plan for any eventuality. He wanted to make sure you and his family are taken care of in case something happened to him," he said firmly.

"I don't want his bloody money! I want him!" she snarled back at Remus.

Remus smiled. "As feisty as Lily! You'll have him, Ginny. If Harry didn't have you, he'd lose, and not just the war with Voldemort. He'd lose everything. We," Remus continued, pointing to the people in the room, "give him the strength he needs to fight. We do it with our love and our trust in him. But you, Ginny, give him the will. You give him the reason to fight."

When she stared at him in confusion, he sighed and tried again. "Think of it this way, sweets. If you were not a part of his life, what would he do after killing Voldemort? What would his goals be? With you, he's made plans for his future, something he never thought about before your relationship with him. It was something he never allowed himself to think about. Now he wants a family, children. Your children, Ginny. The future the two of you have planned together is the reason he fights. The reason he'll win."

Ginny gave Remus a weak smile as she wiped away her tears on her sleeves. She pushed the fear down using her legilimens techniques, squashing it ruthlessly in her mind.

"Do you feel better now, dear?" asked Molly.

"Yes, Mum. I'm sorry for acting so silly," she replied.

"Nonsense dear, you had a right to be upset. Why don't you floo back to the Burrow and help Harry with the twins? Hermione, I know Ronald wouldn't mind a visit from you as well," she said with a smile.

Hermione knew she was being pushed out so the adults could talk among themselves, despite her being of age for over a year, but there was nothing she could do about it. And being with Ronald, even if it's just for a few hours, was always a bonus.

Taking Ginny's hand, the two young women floo'd back to the Burrow.

After they left, Molly leaned back in the couch with a heavy sigh. "Merlin, this is getting to all of us, Remus. She's not the only one to have cried themselves to sleep at night. And if the pressure is this bad on us, what must it be like for Harry?"

Remus poured everyone a stiff drink and passed them around.

Dan Granger coughed politely, looking at Molly. "I can't pretend to know Harry very well, certainly not as well as you or Remus can, but even I can sense the strength of character in him. That boy... no excuse me, that young man is made of steel."

Molly eyed the muggle gratefully. "I know. He's come into our lives and we've all changed because of it. If you had asked me two years ago if I would have allowed my only daughter to sneak into a man's bed I would have told you no. Now, I won't deny her that. I don't think I'd even be upset if she told me she was pregnant with Harry's child at this point."

Remus looked shocked for a moment, then chuckled. "I don't think you need worry about that, Molly. Even if she isn't taking precautions, I know Harry would. You might want to reconsider their timetable though. Once this is over, Harry's going to have every eligible witch, and quite a few non-eligible ones, looking to snare

him. Harry might be able to ignore them, but Ginny can't finish her last year at school if she's fighting off all the witches in Britain. And from what I've heard, she will fight them."

"What have you heard, Remus?" asked Molly her eyes narrowing in suspicion.

"Albus told me about an incident just this month, and another last year, where Ginny took an active role in chasing off some very determined competition. Come next year, it's only going to get worse, as Harry won't be tied to Hogwarts. He'll be working there, but his evenings and weekends will be free and he'll be the most sought after bachelor in the Wizarding world. The funny thing is, that terrifies Harry more than anything else."

"He and I have talked about it. He knows what he has to do and will do it, but hates the fame it brings him. No, hate is too simple a word. He loathes it. He just wants to be Harry. He once told me he'd be afraid to show his face in public once this is over. That's one of the reasons why he loves you, Molly. You've never treated him like the Boy-Who-Lived; you've treated him like Harry. The same can be said for all of us."

Christmas Morning, the Burrow...

Tug.

Harry opened an eye and peeked out from under the covers. He was warm and very comfortable. Ginny was curled up beside him, her arms wrapped around him. Something had woken him, but what? He fumbled with his glasses for a moment before putting them on.

Tug.

There it was again! Someone was tugging on his big toe! Lifting his head up, he instantly blushed. His movements awoke Ginny. She looked over the blankets to see Jason tugging again on Harry's toe. Unfortunately for Ginny, her blush was more noticeable than Harry's.

Harry glanced at the clock and almost groaned. It was seven o'clock. So much for sleeping in this morning, he thought.

"What's wrong, Jason?" he asked. Then it dawned on him. It was Christmas morning! He grinned at the little boy. "Did Santa come last night, Jason?"

The boy nodded, a big smile on his face and his eyes wide.

"And you want us to come downstairs?"

Another nod.

"Alright, you head on back downstairs and we'll be down in a couple minutes. Then we'll see if Santa brought you anything special," Harry said with a grin.

The boy turned and raced out of the room. Harry wandlessly closed the door so he and Ginny could get up.

Ginny laughed. "You handled that pretty well," she said.

"Well, I'm not about to yell at him for waking me up. Besides, consider it training for the day when our own kids wake us up on Christmas day," he replied, grinning at her.

Entering the kitchen a few minutes later, they found Molly, already serving breakfast, Arthur, a rather grumpy Ron and three very excited kids who wanted everyone to finish eating so they could get to the presents.

Harry walked over to Molly and kissed her good morning before sitting down. As she placed a plate in front of him, she murmured, "I hope you enjoyed being woke up like that."

He smiled at her, replying, "I can think of worse ways to wake up, Molly."

Watching the three kids, Harry soon caught their excitement over the holiday. Unable to help himself, he rushed through his own breakfast. Jason was probably the most amusing to watch. To him, Christmas was a big deal, especially since this would be their first Christmas where someone obviously cared about them.

Eventually, and not without a small amount of teasing, the group of them trooped out to the living room. Harry sat on the floor, leaning against Ginny, while they watched the kids tear into their presents. Eric was beside himself when he opened the Wizard's Chess set from Harry and Ginny. Erika squealed in delight when she opened the Lunascope, and again at the book entitled 'From Muggle to Witch'. Jason was the real surprise though. Seeing the miniature Quidditch set, his eyes lit up and he grabbed Harry in a hug.

Molly was in tears when Harry gave her a picture he had drawn of the Burrow. It was the first time he had ever tried doing anything in color. She made a place for it over the mantelpiece, placing the picture there with a sticking charm.

Ginny looked at Harry, smiling as he handed her a small box. Opening the box, she found a pair of small diamond studded earrings. The diamonds weren't large, but they glowed with a life of their own.

"My grandmother gave them to my mother, Gin," he said softly. "According to Remus, they've been handed down to the wife of every Potter heir for generations. Family legend says that Merlin himself had a hand in making them. I don't know if that's true or not, but I thought you'd like them."

The adults in the room fell silent as Ginny took the earrings out with a trembling hand. Even if it wasn't a true legend, to touch something that might have been touched by Merlin? Molly came over to help her daughter put them on. Ginny looked at Harry for a long moment then flung herself into his arms.

He kissed the top of her head and held her tight. It's a great Christmas, he thought, the best I can remember.

Chapter 10 - Portrait Mania is for the Birds

Christmas Dinner at Grimmauld Place...

It was just a little after noon when Tonks arrived in the Burrow to help the kids collect their stuff and get ready for the move to Grimmauld Place. Since Harry owned the house, he had turned over the top floor to Remus when he married Tonks. The second floor, main floor and basements were reserved for use by the Order, although Tonks and Remus used the kitchen on the main floor for their meals.

Harry and Remus had decided shortly after Harry was given the estate that Remus would stay there until the war was over. And as manager of his financial assets, Remus would also see about making Grimmauld more livable. That little task was done last year by borrowing a few house elves from Hogwarts to refurbish the place. It was Dobby who actually came up with the way to remove the painting of Mrs. Black that offended so many people. He simply removed the entire wall, banished it, and then multiple elves replaced the wall.

Remus and Harry had split the Black family fortune. Harry had insisted on that. In fact, it was the only way Remus could get Harry to accept it at all. This made Remus, for the first time in his life, a very wealthy man.

It was a condition he wasn't used to, and had it not been for Tonks, he probably would have continued to dress in his old shabby clothing. Even Remus admitted that the money did come in handy at times.

Remus and Tonks had spent the better part of the last three days chasing all over London in their attempts to decorate the bedrooms for their new family. Decked out in Gryffindor red and gold, they had set up three bedrooms, one for each of the children. To say that they were nervous would be a major understatement. Remus was nervous, Tonks was terrified.

When Tonks and kids were ready, they met up in the living room of the Burrow. Everyone was going to floo to Grimmauld for dinner. Tonks took the children through first, followed by Harry, Ginny and Ron and finally Molly and Arthur.

Harry, as usual, tripped on the way out of the floo and fell to the floor.

"OY! Now that's more like it!" Ron shouted with a laugh. Ginny and Hermione, who had been waiting for them, laughed and helped Harry to his feet.

"Honestly Harry, I don't see how you can do so many difficult things when you can't travel by portkey or floo without falling down," said Hermione in exasperation.

"It takes practice, 'Mione. Besides, I keep hoping you'll invent an easier way of transport," he replied, trying to maintain his dignity. Hermione would have replied to that comment, but she was busy snogging Ron.

Harry and Ginny moved away from the floo and greeted the Grangers.

"Hello Mr. Granger, Mrs. Granger," he said.

Emma looked up at him. "Harry, after last year, you'd think we'd be beyond the formality. I owe you both my husband and my daughter's life and you're sheltering us in this lovely home. Don't you think it's time you just call us Dan and Emma?"

Harry smiled. "Alright then, Emma. Have you enjoyed your holiday so far?" he asked.

"Yes, Harry. We've spent time with Hermione, and we've helped Remus and his wife decorate the rooms for the children."

Molly broke in, talking to Remus and Tonks. "Tonks, why don't you two take the children and show them their new rooms? I'll pop into the kitchen and make sure dinner is moving along. Come down when you're ready."

Tonks shot Molly a look of gratitude. Remus offered a hand to the twins and they all went upstairs.

All three kids had similar rooms. The main differences were the bookshelves and desks in the two older kid's rooms for doing their homework. Jason's room had a nice selection of stuffed and animated toys for him to play with. The twins, having gotten used to sleeping apart, loved their new rooms. Jason thought the new toys were the best. He grabbed Tonks and hugged her tight, bringing tears to her eyes.

The two adults gathered all of the children in their bedroom after showing them where everything else was. Sitting them down on the bed, Remus conjured two chairs for himself and Tonks.

"I know we talked about this back at the Burrow, but I want you to know, this is your home now. The papers came through yesterday making it official. We're your parents now and we are going to take care of you," Remus said with a smile.

Erika gripped Eric's hand tightly then reached down to take Jason's hand. "You're going to be our Mum and Dad? For real? You're not going to send us away?"

"No sweetie, we're not going to send you away. You can keep your last name if you want, or you can be Erika Lupin," Tonks said.

"I think I'd like to be Eric Lupin. It's easier to spell," said Eric shyly.

Remus laughed. "Alright, Eric Lupin it is!"

"And we can call you Mum and Dad?" Erika asked, almost as shy as Eric had been a moment earlier.

Tonks gave her a big smile. "I'd really like that, Erika."

A few minutes later, the five members of the Lupin family descended the stairs to rejoin their guests.

Ron and Hermione, Later that same evening...

Ron and Hermione had slipped off to the study after dinner. Ron had something he wanted to talk to her about, but he didn't want to discuss it in front of his friends and family.

Hermione sat on the loveseat in front of the fireplace. Hermione had her legs curled up under her. She knew Ron was upset about something and she watched him as he paced in front of her, trying to figure out what he was going to say.

"Ronald, relax. Just tell me what you want to say," she told him.

He stopped pacing for a moment, and looked at her. His look was one of both pain and longing. He had been thinking about this a lot lately. It had been bothering him, eating at him in fact.

Finally, he sat next to her but tried not to touch her. His shoulders slumped in defeat, and he hung his head.

"Mione... I'm beginning to think you would be better off without me," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Hermione was too shocked to reply.

"I'm just no good. I wanted to give you an engagement ring for your birthday this past September and I couldn't even find work this summer to pay for it. I'm not rich like Harry. You're so much smarter than I am. My grades are only fair. You could do so much better..." he said, tears streaming down his face

Her face went through a myriad of emotions and for a long moment she sat there saying nothing. Then she got up on her knees and moved over to him and took his face in her hands.

"Ronald," she began softly, "I don't care how much money you have. Harry and Ginny both told me you were trying to find work this summer. There's a war on, Ron. People aren't hiring and they're saving what they have. You're exactly what I've always needed. I'm always too serious and would spend my life buried in books. But you show me there's more to life than just books. You show me how to enjoy life Ron, how to have fun. That's one of the things I love about you," she concluded.

Then she kissed him softly on the forehead and pulled him into an embrace. "The ring will come in its own good time. What I need now and always is your love, not some ring. You big bloody prat, how could you think you're not good enough for me?" she murmured. He wrapped his arms about her and held her tightly to him.

Neither of them noticed a frowning Remus walk away from the study door.

Somewhere in England, Location unknown...

"Report!" snapped Voldemort.

"Master, all is in readiness for tomorrow," the Death Eater replied. "We have three Death Squads that will make a lightening attack, then portkey away. With the holiday crowd, we expect the devastation to be quite impressive. Additional attacks will be made in muggle London at the same time."

"It had better be," threatened Voldemort.

Muggle London...

One of the biggest disadvantages of being non-magical was that people couldn't see truly magical creatures such as Dementors. For this reason, the authorities had absolutely no clue what caused four city buses, full of comatose people, to crash.

When the same thing happened the next day to a subway train, the authorities became concerned enough to contact the World Health Organization and the American Centers for Disease Control, asking for assistance. The British Department of Public Health issued an alert advisory which was sent to every hospital in the country.

For the first time, the BBC reported outbreaks of a strange sleeping sickness, which resulted in coma. A unique kind of fear crept into the hearts of Londoner's, a fear which hadn't been seen since the blitz. It wasn't a panic yet.

The Ministry of Magic, preoccupied with its own concerns, finally became aware that something was seriously wrong within the muggle community.

Diagon Alley, three days before New Years...

The attack was as sudden as it was deadly. Fortunately, the Death Eaters made two fatal mistakes in their planning. The noontime holiday crowds were not as big as they had anticipated, and a group of Aurors was on hand with trainees to monitor the crowd.

Thirty Death Eaters portkeyed to a spot just in front of Gringots and started shooting into the crowd. Within moments, they were under fire from ten Aurors and ten trainees. The Aurors and the trainees would have been overwhelmed, but two minutes into the battle, more than twenty-five goblin guards joined in the fray from Gringots itself.

In the end, only ten Death Eaters managed to escape, but the damage was done. Two Aurors were dead, and four trainees injured. There were ten civilians killed and more than thirty injured. There was also considerable damage to property.

The Burrow...

Harry was sitting in the kitchen with Ginny, Molly, Ron and Hermione. He was leafing through his mail, mostly stuff from Remus about his portfolio. Remus was still using a service to screen Harry's mail, but occasionally something slipped through. Spotting a letter he didn't recognize, he opened it and pulled out a parchment.

When the letter was removed, a photograph and a rather flimsy piece of clothing fell to the table.

Ginny picked up the clothing and photo and looked at Harry, her eyes flashing dangerously.

Harry immediately started to stammer. "D-D-Don't I-I-look at me like that. You know that sometimes mail slips through the screeners."

Ron reached for the obviously posed, less than clothed photo, and Hermione smacked his hand. "You don't need to gawking at Harry's fan mail either, Ronald," she said archly.

Harry threw the letter and photo in the fireplace. Then he gently removed the g-string Ginny was twirling at him and tossed it into the blaze.

He was about to go back thumbing through his mail when his locket suddenly thumped hard against his chest. Ginny caught the motion of the locket under his shirt and eyed him curiously. He returned her look with more than a touch of panic.

"Harry? What's wrong?" she asked.

"I think another attack is starting," he said barely above a whisper.

While the others watched in concern, she got up from her chair and pulled him into a tight embrace. He closed his eyes and tried to fight the feelings of loss and pain. Instead he concentrated on his internal phoenix song and the love he could feel flowing from Ginny.

Fortunately he was either coming to control these episodes, or it wasn't as bad as the others. In any event, within fifteen minutes it was all over and Harry was feeling better. Ginny was about to go back to her seat when Harry pulled her into his lap.

He kissed the nape of her neck and just sat there looking over the rest of his mail. Since his hands were busy holding her, Ginny sorted it for him. At the bottom of the pile was personal letter from Remus. Ginny opened that letter and both her and Harry read it. Harry didn't mind sharing his correspondence with Ginny. He had been sharing that sort of thing with her since the beginning of last summer.

The last paragraph of the letter caught his eye. He waited for Ginny to catch up with him. He could tell she had by her shocked inhalation.

"Mione, read the last paragraph of this letter would you please?" he asked sliding the letter in her direction.

After a moment she gave a screech, startling Ron. Then she grabbed him and gave him a kiss that left him speechless.

"What the... what's..." Ron trailed off looking bewildered at his girlfriend, sister and best friend, who were all grinning at him.

"Mate," Harry began, "seems ol'Remus overheard a conversation of yours on Christmas day. He was about to talk to a friend of his to see if something could be done, when his friend started telling him about this new keeper they'd spotted. Seems they were planning on offering a reserve keeper contract to this guy, with an option to start."

As Harry continued to talk, Ron's mouth dropped and he stared at Harry in shock.

"Yes Ron, Remus was going to put a good word in for you with the general manager of the Chudley Cannons. But it seems it wasn't necessary. In fact, before we return from holiday break, you should be getting a letter telling you about their offer. And there's a one thousand galleon sign up bonus," Harry said with a huge grin.

Molly looked pale and sat down next to Ron. She looked at him in shock for a moment before she pulled him into a bone-crushing embrace.

"I'm going to play Quidditch professionally?" he whispered to himself. "I'm going to play Quidditch professionally!" he said again in a shout, then lunged for Hermione.

Hogwarts, Headmasters office...

Dumbledore sat behind his desk, reading the latest reports from Order members in the field when someone knocked on his door.

"Enter," he called.

Wan Chang entered the room. The past month had done much to change her attitude and her demeanor towards both her teachers and her fellow students. Unfortunately, many of the students refused to give her the chance to show that to them.

She had been nearly disowned by her family until Dumbledore intervened on her behalf and stopped that from happening. As a result however, she was spending the holiday break at Hogwarts. She was a solitary figure who spent most of her time either working on detention assignments or just taking walks in the castle itself.

"Come in, Miss Chang. Please, take a seat," said Dumbledore. "Would you care for a lemon drop?"

"No, thank you Headmaster," she replied.

"So what can I do for you today, Miss Chang?" he asked gently. Dumbledore knew this girl had made a terrible mistake, but he didn't see any need to continually grinding her face in it either.

"Headmaster, I've thought about this a lot. I'd like you to know that I didn't have any part in the attack on the students in the school. I know who some of them are but if I tell you, then I'd only have more students out for my blood..." she faltered at this point.

He nodded in understanding and motioned for her to continue.

"I don't think the attacks on students have stopped. I thought you ought to know that. This past month had been... painful for me... and very illuminating. I understand why I have to be punished Sir, and I've accepted that. But..." She paused and squared her shoulders. "Sir, I know what's coming to Hogwarts. The whole school knows. I also know that Professor Potter and his friends would never let me help them. But I'd still like to help, even if in just a small way. Do you think it might be possible for Madam Pomfrey to teach me some healing spells, so I can help when the time comes?" she asked timidly.

He sat there for a long moment, measuring her sincerity. Finally, with a twinkle in his eye, he replied, "My dear, it takes great strength of character to admit to be deserving of punishment, and even greater strength to be willing to work for the common good when so many are opposed to your helping at all.

"I will speak to Madam Pomfrey and, if she is willing, I'll assign you to her as a part time assistant. You will continue with your regular detentions and assignments until Madam Pomfrey assures me she feels you can increase the workload in the infirmary. Then we'll cut back on the other assignments.

"I am pleased with your progress Miss Chang and your request gives me hope that you may yet become a valuable member of our society. I will inform your parents of this, and I will speak to Professor Potter. I doubt that many of his friends and comrades will change their minds about you, but if I know him, he will take steps to make sure they do not add to your burden."

The next morning at the Burrow...

Attack on Diagon Alley, Boy-Who-Lived Does nothing!
By Rita Skeeter

Yesterday morning, followers of You-Know-Who, also known as Lord You-Know-Who, perpetrated a vicious attack on Diagon Alley. During this short raid, twelve people, including two Aurors, were killed and nearly forty injured. Ten Death Eaters were seen escaping the scene.

Ministry sources say the Auror force is stretched to the bone and unable to adequately cover all areas of concern. In the meantime, this reporter has learned that the Boy-Who-Lived is on holiday break from his time at Hogwarts, spending the time with his current girlfriend and her family. His callous disregard for the lives and safety of the Wizarding world continues to astound us at the Daily Prophet and we call on the Ministry to force him to action. It is this reporter's opinion that if this current girlfriend is that much of a distraction, then the Ministry should take steps to keep the two of them apart.

A Ministry spokesman for the Minister of Magic, Amelia Bones, rejected our call this morning and ejected this reporter from the Ministry building. This violent behavior is typical of the attitude the current administration has had towards the press since the election of Amelia Bones and this reporter cannot help but wonder if we weren't better off with Cornelius Fudge as Minister...

Harry laid the paper down on the kitchen table with a big smile. Ginny, Molly and Ron were fuming after reading the headline.

"Harry, how can you smile after that?" Ginny asked, her fists clenching spasmodically.

Harry chuckled and leaned over to kiss her cheek. "Love, you know this kind of thing is bound to happen, especially after an attack. But I have a plan. Ron? Do you think you could convince 'Mione to come over and join us for a little trip today?"

Molly looked at Harry, her eyes narrowing, "What have you got up your sleeve, Harry? If I didn't know better, I'd say you were about to prank someone like Fred or George!"

Harry smiled innocently at her. "Tell you what Molly, why don't you come along with us? This shouldn't take more than an hour or two," he said.

Ron went to floo Hermione. Ginny and Molly pestered Harry for details, but he said he didn't want to ruin the surprise for them. When Hermione arrived, Harry told her about the little trip they were all going to make and promised her that she, most of all, would enjoy it.

Trooping out to the living room, Harry grabbed Ginny's hand and stepped into the floo. With a shout of "Daily Prophet Main Office" they were gone in a flash of green light.

Ron and Hermione quickly followed with Molly right behind. Ron was especially pleased to see Ginny helping Harry to his feet.

"Harry, what are we doing here?" asked Molly.

Harry grinned and winked at her, murmuring, "Just watch, Molly."

Harry led them past a protesting secretary towards a door that read 'Oswald Gonzalez, Managing Editor'. Ushering everyone in, he closed the door behind him. Inside was a short brusque man with a huge mustache and a noticeable bald spot.

"Who in the bloody hell are you people?" bellowed Gonzalez.

"Good morning, Sir. My name is Harry Potter and I'm here to talk to you and Ms. Skeeter," replied Harry in a neutral tone.

Gonzalez's eyes lit up in surprise. Rushing to the door he shouted, "Polly! Get Rita in here now! And tell her to bring her quill!"

"Please, have a seat Mr. Potter. I must say I never expected to meet you. Quite an honor, yes sir! Quite an honor!" he spouted at them as they arranged themselves in seats in front of his desk.

In another moment Rita Skeeter came rushing into the room and stopped in surprise. Then she moved around to a chair next to her boss and pulled out her quick quote quill and some parchment. Before anyone even started to speak, the quill was writing.

"Mr. Potter! Harry! So wonderful to see you again!" she said. She noted the people with Harry, cringing slightly at the presence of Hermione. Then she plunged on, "What's it been Harry, two years since we last talked? You don't mind me calling you Harry do you? So what's your impression of the current administration?"

Harry ignored her questions. "Mr. Gonzalez, I'd like you to meet Ginevra Weasley, my fiancée. Her mother and my guardian until I came of age, Molly Weasley. My brother Ronald Weasley and his fiancée Hermione Granger," he said, pointing to each of them in turn.

"As you can see, my relationship with Ginevra is far beyond girlfriend at this point, and her family is my family. Now my question to you is, why do you have this apparent desire to wage a public vendetta against me in your publication?" Harry asked.

All through Harry's speech, Rita's quill continued to write.

"Vendetta, Mr. Potter? We only report things as we see them, Sir," Gonzalez sputtered.

"So, it is your intention to continue to make up stories about me in your paper, Mr. Gonzalez?" Harry asked.

"We don't make up anything Mr. Potter! To suggest we'd compromise our journalistic integrity borders on slander!" shouted Gonzalez.

"Oh really?" replied Harry softly. With a wave of one hand he summoned the parchment from underneath Rita's quill and started to read it over her shrill protests.

"Hmmm... 'Harry Potter threatens Daily Prophet with death and destruction.' That's quite true I suppose, had I actually said that instead of just thinking it. Oh my, here's another quote. 'Harry Potter says the current administration is corrupt and should be recalled.' Again, I never mentioned the current government. And another. 'Harry Potter defends his ragtag family, despite rumors of prostitution'. Are you seeing a pattern here, Mr. Gonzalez?" he asked in a steely tone, his eyes flashing dangerously.

Rita started to sputter, "You can't intimidate the press, Harry Potter!"

"You're absolutely correct, Rita. Had I been an average citizen, I would have had to put up with your lies and not been able to do anything about it," he replied calmly.

Harry cast a spell which shattered Rita's quill. She jumped with a startled yelp. Then he leaned back and smiled at the two of them.

"Unfortunately for you both, there is something I can do about this," he said. Reaching into his jacket pocket, he pulled out some papers and tossed it on Gonzalez's desk.

"Mr. Gonzalez, that is to inform you that, as of three days before Christmas, I acquired a majority share in the Daily Prophet. I am now, in effect, your boss. You will print only the verifiable truth from here on, or I will have you replaced. Ms. Skeeter? You, madam are fired. You have thirty minutes to clean out your desk and

leave the building. And as a final warning Ms. Skeeter, I will be speaking to Director Kingsley today about your unregistered animagus status," Harry said coldly.

Gonzalez was trembling violently as he read the document Harry had given him. Rita turned pale as his words hit home.

Gonzalez looked to Rita. It was time to cut his losses and save his own skin. "You heard the boss Rita. Get out."

Rita looked totally shell shocked as she left the office. All of Harry's friends were staring at him. All, that is, except Hermione. She was jubilant and looked as if she would leap up and start dancing in glee at any moment.

In a much more deferential tone, Gonzalez asked, "Will there be anything else you'd like from us, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, Mr. Gonzalez. I would hope that tomorrow's front page contains not only an apology to my family for the recent publications, but also full retraction of your comments concerning the Ministry, whom I happen to believe is doing a fine job of things. I want the Daily Prophet to become synonymous with truth in print. I want people to respect the paper for its integrity. Do you think you can handle that? Or am I firing two people today?" he asked.

"Yes Sir! We can do that, Mr. Potter!" he stammered.

"I'd also like to see the paper start running a series of articles explaining how people should respond and react to a Death Eater attack. I'd suggest sending someone to talk to Professor Severus Snape at Hogwarts, or Director Kingsley Shacklebolt," Harry added thoughtfully.

"I think that's all for now. We won't take up any more of your time. I'm sure you have many things to do, Mr. Gonzalez. You do, after all, have a newspaper to publish," Harry said with a smile, standing up and offering Gonzalez his hand.

As Harry led everyone back to the floo, they could hear Gonzalez shouting in the background.

"POLLY! I WANT AN ALL HANDS MEETING IN TEN MINUTES! STOP THE PRESSES!"

Harry snickered as he and Ginny went through the floo back to the Burrow.

Once home, everyone was a bit shocked by Hermione. The calm, bushy-haired, prim and proper bookworm let out a loud whoop and hugged Harry.

"Can you believe that? That bloody bitch of a witch finally got what she deserved!" Hermione yelled, leaping into the air.

"Hermione, language!" Ron yelled, looked stunned.

Suddenly the two stopped and stared at each other, astonished. Harry doubled up, laughing at the sudden role reversal. He dropped to the couch and his knees weakened. Molly and Ginny sat next to him, both laughing at the young witch's behavior.

Harry managed to calm down enough to say, "Well, I think the days of seeing my name dragged through the mud by that newspaper are over. I should have bought that paper years ago. Hermione have you ever thought of a career in Journalism?" he asked with a smirk.

Hermione frowned. "No, not really Harry. I've always thought about being a teacher or maybe a researcher working for the Ministry. Why?" she asked.

"Damn, so much for the idea of giving you two the Prophet for your wedding present," Harry chuckled. "I'll have to think of something else then. I wonder if Luna and Neville would like it?" he mused.

With that, he stood and walked out of the room, leaving everyone staring after him, mouths gaping.

Minister of Magic's Office, the next day...

Amelia Bones sat at her desk reading some disturbing reports from the Office of Muggle Affairs. If the trend continued, she'd have no choice but to contact the British Prime Minister and inform him about the war raging across his country.

The door opened and a secretary stuck his head in. "Minister, Director Shacklebolt is here, asking for a few minutes of your time."

"Send him in please," she replied.

Kingsley came in and took a seat, under his arm was a folded up newspaper. "Minister, I just finished giving the strangest interview I've ever had from a reporter for the Daily Prophet. Have you seen the paper today?"

"No, Kingsley. Normally I have a secretary make clippings for me to go through, and that particular paper rarely has anything of value to say," she replied a bit annoyed. She thought his visit was about business, not what a tabloid was doing!

Kingsley tossed the paper on her desk and suggested that she might want to make an exception to that rule today. Quickly, she scanned the headlines.

Daily Prophet under new ownership!

Rita Skeeter arrested by Ministry Aurors!

Prophet Retracts story and apologizes!

Coming soon, a series on Home Defense!

Amelia leaned back in her chair, a huge grin on her face. The largest single paper in the Wizarding World had just joined the war effort on their side.

"I thought you'd appreciate that, Minister," said Kingsley with a grin of his own. "It must be this new owner who's dictating the new editorial policy."

She remembered overhearing the request to buy fifty thousand shares of DLPH, and who made it. "Oh, I can assure you Kingsley, the Prophet has a firm hand guiding it now."

Kingsley nodded. "Well, I just wanted to show you that, Minister. If you'll excuse me?"

Amelia nodded at him absently while she read the paper. As Kingsley closed the door behind him, he was sure he could hear the Minister laughing!

Return to Hogwarts...

Harry got up early on the day they were due to return to Hogwarts. He had packed the night before, so he managed to escape the usual Weasley last minute mayhem. Instead, he took the opportunity to walk the property, pausing every so often as he walked.

Molly watched him carefully from the kitchen window. To her it almost looked like Harry was saying goodbye to a place he had come to love, but never expected to see again. She fought hard to control her emotions.

Molly felt a hand on her shoulder. She looked up at Arthur, his own eyes misty as he watched Harry from the window. She placed her hand on his and squeezed.

"He'll be fine, Molly. He's a strong, fine man. I wish we could have gotten him sooner, but he'll always be ours," Arthur said softly.

Molly nodded mutely, taking comfort from Arthur's words.

Eventually Harry made his way back to the house, a soft smile on his face. Molly turned back to fixing breakfast while Ron and Ginny ran around in a state of total panic upstairs.

It was decided they would go to Grimmauld, pick up the Lupin twins and Hermione, and then take muggle taxis to Kings Cross station.

The Lupin's and the Granger's were waiting when the Weasley's started coming through the floo. Tonks was staying behind with Jason, while everyone else went to platform nine and three quarters. Just before everyone left the house, Jason ran up to Erika and Eric. The little boy hugged them both, then shocked everyone present.

"Bye-bye," he said very quietly.

Erika hugged him back, her eyes shiny with tears. "I knew you'd get around to talking sooner or later, Jason!"

Tonks knelt down next to the little boy, her own eyes moist with unshed tears. "Jason? Will you say something to me?" she asked.

Jason threw his arms around her neck and hugged her. "Love you mum." he said. Tonks let out a cry of her own and held the little boy tightly to her.

Remus, Arthur, Dan and Harry dug handkerchiefs from their pockets and offered them to their women. Ron looked around frantically for something, anything to offer Hermione! She solved her own dilemma by hugging him and wiping her tears on his shoulder.

Ginny sniffled a little and looked at her brother, then at Hermione. "You've got a lot of training to do with that one, you know."

Hermione looked at Ginny while still holding Ron and nodded. "I'm working on it. Some projects just take more time than others," she replied.

With a final parting farewell, the group left for the station and their ride back to Hogwarts.

The Great Hall the next morning...

Harry felt uneasy this morning. Ginny hadn't joined him last night and he'd had trouble sleeping. His dreams were plagued by old nightmares interspersed with dreams of the sword. Because of his trouble sleeping, he'd gotten up early this morning and completed his run well before most of those in the castle even thought about getting up.

Sitting in the Great Hall at a table alone, and with few other students present, he pulled out his sketchpad and started drawing. As he drew, his eyes glazed over. He drifted somewhere between the state of wakefulness and sleep.

"HARRY!"

Suddenly, Harry snapped back to awareness and he looked around in shock. The Great Hall was full of people! Ginny and Hermione were looking at him in concern. Dumbledore sat at their table this morning and he watched them all over his half moon glasses.

"Are you ok?" Ginny asked, brushing the hair out of his eyes. "It looks like you haven't gotten any sleep. Don't tell me you were up training again?"

He shook his head, trying to clear the fog that he seemed to be encased in. "No... No Gin, nothing like that. I just didn't sleep well last night. I finally gave up around four a.m. and got up. I guess I was more tired than I thought. I came in here and started to draw something and fell asleep."

Ginny frowned. "Harry, you were still drawing when we came in. You couldn't have fallen asleep."

"That's not quite true Miss Weasley. But perhaps we'll find the answer if we examined what he was drawing?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry looked down at his sketchpad, startled. He started flipping back to the last picture he remembered drawing. He had drawn eight pages of the sword! Mutely, he handed the sketchpad over to Dumbledore who started looking at the drawings from the page he indicated.

Dumbledore arched an eyebrow as the sword seemed to undergo a step by step transformation in each consecutive drawing. The first page showed the sword starting as bar stock, being forged and made into a sword. There were several sketches of the sword on an anvil, being struck by a hammer, and then another series with hands grinding down the edges, finally filing them and polishing the sword. By the middle of the series, the sword was complete, except for the hilt.

The series continued with the carving of the crest of Gryffindor on the hilt, along with the strange indentations. Then there was one page of the sword with some sort of attachment to the hilt before the pictures changed to the sword as it was today.

"If I didn't know better Harry, I'd say that you had drawn these images as the sword was being created. It appears to be a very interesting depiction of the history of the sword, especially this image," Dumbledore said as he handed the pad to Harry, open to the page with the sword and its attachment to the hilt.

Harry stared at the image in consternation, then he gave the pad back to Dumbledore. "It appears, Sir, as if there's something hanging on the end of the hilt. It's almost like it was added as an afterthought," Harry said.

"Yes Harry, that was my thought also. It would explain those indents on the hilt if there was something that was supposed to attached there, would it not?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry thought for a moment, then looked into Dumbledore's twinkling blue eyes with an emerald gaze that sparkled. The two men beamed at each other.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking, Sir?"

"Quite Harry. At one time there was something attached to the hilt for a specific purpose, which was later removed," replied Dumbledore quietly.

"Now the question is, how do we find out what it was?" Harry asked.

Harry started thinking while Dumbledore thumbed through the sketchpad, looking at the other images Harry had drawn.

Ginny grabbed Harry by the chin. "I don't think you're going to do that today, Harry. You look exhausted. Your eyes are bloodshot and you have huge bags under them. I think its going to be an easy day for you and an early night," she said, her voice full of concern.

Ginny ran her hand through the hair on the back of his neck and he shivered. Damn, he thought, she knows how relaxing I find that. She's doing it deliberately!

Dumbledore watched the couple with amusement for a moment before continuing to look through Harry's book. He stopped at one image in surprise.

"Harry, what is this place?" asked Dumbledore with a small smile.

Harry's eyes snapped open and he focused on the book. Ginny had nearly put him to sleep! It took his mind a moment to wake up enough to realize what Dumbledore was talking about.

"Oh, that. I meant to show you that before the holiday break, Sir," he replied, trying not to yawn. He went on to explain how his search for information on the sword led him to the paintings, and how that had led to searching the unused rooms below the dungeons until he found the corridor with the strangely shielded doors.

Dumbledore leaned back in silence for a moment. "You know, when I was made Headmaster, my mentor told me about the 'lost' sections of Hogwarts. You may have stumbled onto one of those sections Harry. Astounding! Think of what might be down there!"

Hermione looked eager, so Harry decided it was time to needle her a bit. "Umm... 'Mione, you don't want to go down there. Remember the bats?" he reminded her with a grin.

Hermione put a hand to her bushy hair and frowned at him until Ginny giggled. "I'll figure something out, Harry," she said tartly. "Perhaps we should all check out this lost corridor of yours."

"That's not a bad idea, 'Mione. But I'd suggest wearing pants instead of the school skirt. It's pretty grungy down there and there's a ladder about twenty feet long that we'll need to climb down."

Dumbledore handed the sketchpad back to Harry. "I look forward to hearing your report on what you find, Harry. I daresay I'm too old to be climbing ladders these days. I'd suggest waiting until the weekend, after you've had a chance to rest some?"

Harry took the pad back nodding in agreement. "Oh, one other thing, Professor Potter," Dumbledore continued as he stood up. "I trust you will be more careful with any new spells you develop?"

Harry shot an evil glare at Ginny and Hermione. "Yes, Headmaster. I will see that there are no further 'leaks' of new spells."

Dumbledore smiled benignly and walked away from the table.

Harry turned to Ron. "Mate, you have a game this month, don't you?"

Ron nodded. He then glanced at Hermione, swallowed and replied, "Yeah, we have a game on the last weekend, why?"

Hermione leaned back and looked down at her plate, hiding a smile. As predicted, a letter had arrived for Ron before they left home. Now, he and Hermione were shopping for a ring under her tightly controlled budget. She didn't want Ron spending all of his bonus money on a ring.

"I think that maybe this weekend we'll all take a crack at that corridor and see what we can find. Perhaps Hermione can figure out what's shielding those doors. With four of us, we should be able to contain those bats easily enough," Harry said.

"Good enough Mate. I'll go along," Ron replied.

Harry eyed the two girls. They both looked at each other then nodded at him. He checked his watch and sighed. "Well, I'm off. Jack and I are supposed to be meeting Moody and some of his students this morning."

Harry kissed Ginny on the cheek, then stood and left the Great Hall leaving his three friends behind. Ginny watched his retreating back, frowning.

"Ginny," began Hermione, but Ginny interrupted her.

"Yes 'Mione, I know. We've got to get him to slow down and rest more often," she said softly. "Although, only Merlin knows how we're going to do that. I'd slip him a sleeping potion, but he can smell them a mile away."

Hermione reached across the table and took Ginny's hand in hers. "We'll figure something out."

Saturday in the lost corridor...

With the four of them, they were able to overcome the bat issue easily enough. However, to be on the safe side, Hermione had conjured two hats for herself and Ginny.

Now all four were at the bottom of the ladder, examining the corridor they were in. There were no torches down here so they had to rely on spelled lighting. Hermione was busy checking the door Harry had tried to open before. She ran several detection spells over it, muttering under her breath.

Harry watched her for a moment, but was distracted by a rhythmic pulsing he felt more than heard. His attention was drawn back to Hermione when she stepped back from the door and stomped a foot in frustration.

"Harry, I don't know what's shielding these doors. Whatever it is doesn't show up on any detection spell I know," she said, practically whining. "Can't you use Wings to get beyond the door, Harry?" she asked.

Harry shook his head saying, "I need to know where I'm going, Hermione. I can't just flame travel to a place I've never seen before."

Ginny frowned at the two of them. "'Mione, if your detection spells don't work, then maybe they can't detect this kind of shield, maybe it's different somehow? Do we try Alohomora again?" she asked.

Hermione froze for a moment, staring at Ginny. Then she shook her head. "That's it! The detection spells can't detect it because it's not human magic! The detection spells can only detect human spells! Oh, but what other creature would be casting magic here?"

Harry slowly broke out into a huge grin. "I know. Something Professor Snape said last month. She said Dobby and the House Elves know more about Hogwarts than Dumbledore! How much would you like to bet that shield is a elfin shield?"

The other three looked at him speculatively for a moment.

"Dobby!" Harry called.

There was a loud pop and suddenly Dobby was standing before them.

"Harry Potter! Yous call, Dobby come! Why is we in here? This is elf storage areas," said the little elf.

Harry knelt down. "Dobby, we're looking for some paintings of Godric Gryffindor. We think they may be down here somewhere. Do you know where they are?"

"Dobby show yous! Follow me, Harry Potter!" the little elf cried and took them down the corridor. The four friends looked at each other and, shrugging, followed.

As they walked down the seemingly endless corridor, Harry felt that throbbing pulsation become even more pronounced. He looked around at his friends, but they seemed oblivious to it.

When Dobby stopped, Harry examined the door in front of them. It looked no different than any other door they'd passed. With a wave of his hands, Dobby collapsed the shield.

"It's safe for yous to go in, Harry Potter! Dobby will help yous find the paintings," the little elf said.

Harry smiled and rolled his eyes at his friends then they entered the darkened room. Dobby activated some torches along the wall and they could see hundreds of paintings lining the walls of the room.

It took them several hours, but they eventually managed to locate four very dirty portraits of Godric Gryffindor in which he seemed to be holding his sword. Harry shrunk those portraits and stuck them in his pocket to look at later. The throbbing was driving him to distraction.

Harry left the room without even waiting for his friends, still following the corridor. Finally, he stopped at a door. It looked like all the others, but somehow he knew this door wasn't shielded.

Reaching out for the door, his hand passed right through it. Startled, he realized that the door must be an illusion. He stepped through the door.

Ginny looked up from the painting she was examining. "Harry?" she called.

The other two looked at each other and then towards the open door.

"OY! MATE!" yelled Ron, looking worried.

Dobby looked at the three nervously and scuffed at the ground.

"Dobby, did you see Harry leave the room?" asked Ginny.

"Yes, Miz Weezy. I saw him leave. He goes to the heart to talk," replied Dobby.

The three bolted from the room, only to be brought up short by a strange gold and silver translucent shield blocking one direction of the corridor. Dobby appeared in front of the shield with his arms outstretched.

"Yous cannot pass," cried the elf. "It is death if yous do!"

Hermione grabbed Ginny and Ron, holding them back. "No! That's a judgment shield," she whispered.

The two looked at her curiously. "It's very old, very dangerous and powerful light magic. Normally, it's invisible. It becomes visible as a warning to stay away. I read in 'Hogwarts: A History' that one was once seen in the school," said Hermione, her voice filled with awe.

Ginny looked at the shield, then back at Hermione in anguish. "What do we do?" she asked in a whisper.

Ron shrugged his shoulders. His gaze was focused on the corridor beyond the shield. "We wait, I guess," he replied.

Harry was in an impossible room. The room wasn't overly long or wide, but the ceiling extended upwards until it wasn't visible at all. All along the room, at regular intervals, were cubbyholes and each had a wooden bar at the bottom. The cubbyholes were about four feet high and three feet wide. There were twenty of them

at eye level, with twenty more above those. Squinting, he realized that the cubbyholes stretched up as far as he could see.

In the center of the room was a stone square column roughly five feet high. Atop the column was a single block of stone, which appeared to be little different than any other block of stone found at Hogwarts, except that this stone pulsated with a soft, welcoming light. The light beckoned to him, its rhythmic pulsing seemed almost like a heartbeat.

Moving towards the column, he walked around it carefully, examining it. On each side of the column were strange runes and the crests of the four founders of Hogwarts. The top stone had a single glyph carved in it and under it the word 'Lailoken'.

Harry reached out and touched the glyph. Although the stone itself was cool to the touch, he felt comforting warmth fill his body, starting with his fingertips. His eyes fluttered for a moment, then closed. The stone flared with a startling blue intensity, filling the room with light. Harry, fixed to the spot by his touch, was overwhelmed by a series of visions of Hogwarts, the single concept that Harry could understand, was one that simple said 'welcome'. The stone flared again, its luminosity doubling, trebling, and quadrupling in seconds.

Harry's friends sat a few feet away from the Judgment shield. Dobby had brought them some sandwiches and drinks while they waited. Ron was the one who noticed first.

"Is it me, or are things getting brighter in here?" he asked, perplexed.

"I don't think it's you Ron," replied Hermione. "I think Harry is somehow causing this."

Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts...

Albus Dumbledore sat in his office talking with Minerva McGonagall, Serena and Severus Snape.

"Headmaster, I understand you're trying to rehabilitate that girl, but I don't trust her in the infirmary," Serena said hotly.

"Serena my dear, we have to extend her some level of trust if we are ever to expect her to be able to trust us again. She is but a child still, and Madam Pomfrey says she has been most helpful and quick to learn the healing arts. It is my deep hope that..."

The Headmaster stopped talking. On his perch, Fawkes stood up tall and stretched his wings, singing a song of jubilation. The walls shimmered with a bright blue light and there was a clear piercing tone, as if someone had struck a crystal bell.

Fawkes pulled in his wings and puffed out his chest, looking incredibly smug at the three people. He sang a soft crooning tone that was both soothing and happy as the light faded from the walls.

Well done fledgling! There is still hope for the light, thanks to you, thought Fawkes. The summoning has begun.

Somewhere in England, Location unknown...

Voldemort sat in his chamber cackling with glee. His servants had brought in several muggles whom he had just finished torturing to death.

"Send for Wormtail! I wish to give him orders for more attacks," Voldemort said. He rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

The muggles were terrified of a strange new disease, not knowing it was his Dementors. The Wizarding World was only just starting to notice. Soon, the whole world would know of his power and his ability to strike terror everywhere.

Wormtail rushed into the room. "You called, I came, my master," the man whined, bowing low.

"Excellent Wormtail! I have more targets to give you for Oogla-Dain," Voldemort said, sneering at the cowering figure.

Voldemort bolted to his feet abruptly. His head exploded in a flowering of pain the likes of which he had never felt before. His hands flew to the sides of his head as if to hold it together. His red eyes drained of their malignant color and for a moment, just a brief moment, the blue eyed Tom Riddle looked out across the chamber in fear. One thought percolated through his head. POTTER! Then his eyes rolled upward and he pitched forward, falling on top of Wormtail.

The Lost Corridor...

Hermione had almost talked Ron into going to the Headmaster for help when a figure appeared down the corridor.

As Harry approached the shield, it faded away. His three friends stood up and faced him. Ginny rushed over to his side and grabbed him by his arm.

"Harry, where have you been? You've been gone for hours! We were so worried..." she trailed off as he looked down at her upturned face and smiled softly.

"I'm fine, Gin," replied Harry, then he caressed her cheek and kissed her forehead.

"Harry, what did you do?" asked Hermione, burning with curiosity.

Harry's eyebrows knitted together in confusion. "I'm not sure if I can explain it 'Mione. I think I had a conversation with Hogwarts. I think we'd best go to the Headmaster's office. I'm sure I'm going to be explaining this to him, as well."

The four of them went to the end of the corridor and up the ladder. Once they had moved the bats back into the hole, Harry closed the trapdoor.

Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts...

Dumbledore wasn't surprised when Harry and his friends showed up at his door. He had, in fact, been expecting them for several hours.

Dumbledore waved them inside and then went to his floo to summon McGonagall and the Snapes. While they waited, Dumbledore made the obligatory offer of lemon drops. All but Hermione declined, causing them to snicker.

Once the teachers arrived, all eyes turned to Harry.

"Harry, I don't know what you've done this time, but whatever it was, Fawkes is most impressed and pleased by it," said Dumbledore. At the mention of his name, Fawkes puffed out his chest.

"To be honest Sir, I'm not sure what I did. If I can borrow your Pensieve, it might be best if I show you what I encountered," Harry replied.

Once Dumbledore set the Pensieve on his desk, Harry deposited his memory into it, but didn't activate it.

"As you know," Harry said, facing the others in the room, "we've been trying to figure out why I keep getting images of Godric's sword. We'll, we found the place where the house elves store stuff Hogwarts is no longer using, including these four paintings." Harry pulled the paintings out of his pocket and enlarged them.

"After I found the paintings," he continued, "I felt umm... a 'call' I guess is the best way to describe it. I walked towards the source of that call and entered a room that I've never heard about in any history book..." He shot an apologetic glance at Hermione. "This is what I saw."

He activated the Pensieve and an image appeared above the bowl. Dumbledore stared intently at it, his visage almost wistful. Hermione gasped when the name 'Lailoken' swam into view. They could see Harry reach out and touch the name and the stone flared with light. Harry ended the memory at that point.

"Lailoken," whispered Hermione in awe. Several of the teachers looked at her in amusement. Ginny cocked an eyebrow at her in question.

"Lailoken is a name of an English prophet during the time of King Arthur," Hermione explained to Ginny.
"Most muggle scholars believe he is the source of the legend of Merlin."

Dumbledore nodded approvingly at her. "Actually, Merlin used several names during his lifetime, Lailoken being only one of them. The room Harry entered was always, in my mind, a myth. It was said that during the building of Hogwarts, the four founders first built a 'Heart Chamber', a special place from which all of Hogwarts' magic derived. Obviously Hogwarts decided that Harry needed to visit the chamber, but for what purpose? I can only surmise that the top stone on the pillar is a relic from Merlin's time.

"I envy you, Harry. You have visited a place I believed did not exist," finished Dumbledore softly, his eyes distant as he remembered the image in the Pensieve.

Harry looked the four paintings and slumped back in his chair in dismay. "I had hoped these would be of use, but even in the better light the images are too dark and dirty to make out any detail."

"I'm not so sure, Harry," said Serena softly. "Let me see if I can clean these up and bring out the detail in them."

Harry nodded gratefully to her as she shrunk the paintings down and put them in her pocket.

Meeting at the Ministry...

Harry, Jack and Severus Snape had taken the day off today to attend a meeting at the Ministry with Alastor Moody, Hestia Jones and Kingsley Shacklebolt. Dumbledore was supposed to attend, but had been detained unexpectedly.

"Now we all know that we have an eight day time frame during which we expect the attack to occur," said Jack Parsons. "I think it's important that we delay the evacuation of the students for as long as possible. If we moved them out of the school too soon, we risk the chance of a parent tipping Voldemort off and making him aware that we know he's coming."

"I believe I have a solution to that particular problem Professor," Dumbledore replied mildly as he walked into the room. Dumbledore just loved dropping these little surprises on people.

"I have just finished a conversation with Madame Maxime of Beauxbatons in France. Professors Sprout, Sinistra and Vector will escort the first, second and third years to Beauxbatons. The parents will be owled with a message, stating their children will be attending a two-week cultural exchange, hosted by Madame Maxime. Even as I speak, portkeys are being made up," stated Dumbledore.

Jack nodded gratefully to Dumbledore as the old wizard took a seat. "Well that settles that. Now, the question is, how close do we shave the evacuation? Ideally, I'd like to see the lower classes out of the school with at least two days time for us to move forces in and get everything prepared. I'd like more time, but two days is a minimum in my book."

Jack looked around the table and, seeing no dissent, said, "Ok so the students are gone by the fifth of April. What's next?"

Hestia raised her hand and Jack nodded for her to speak.

"Around April first, St. Mungos will be bringing in supplies. They expect to release several healers to Hogwarts on the sixth. The Ministry defense teams will be moving into Hogwarts on the sixth, as well. Remus Lupin informed me that the Goblin Brigade will be arriving early on the morning of the seventh," she concluded.

"Has anyone given any thought as to how we're going to use the Goblins?" asked Harry.

Jack eyed Harry carefully. "What's on yer mind, Harry? Spill it," he said.

Harry looked around the table. As the youngest person there, he still felt uncomfortable, but all he saw was interested looks.

"Alright then, we're dealing with a castle. If this were the typical castle warfare, the opposing force would encircle the castle and begin standard siege warfare. But I don't think Voldemort is going to be that sophisticated in his attack. I think he's going to drive straight for the gates," Harry said carefully.

Jack looked at the ceiling for a moment then turned back to Harry. "That makes sense Harry, but how does it affect the Goblins?" he asked.

"Well, if we hide half the Goblin detachment in the Forbidden Forest and kept the other half in reserve..." he trailed off, watching Jack intently.

A feral grin appeared on Jack's face. "Yes. We could flank his troops and force him into a two-axis fight. I like it! And if he does make a drive for the gates, we'll be able to pull most of our fighters from their positions and concentrate them around the gates."

Several hours later the meeting broke up. A lot of material had been covered and, while he had done no physical work, Harry was wrung out.

Somewhere in England, Location unknown...

Voldemort slowly regained consciousness. He opened his eyes to find himself staring into the face of Wormtail.

"Master, you must drink this potion," the short man whined. "You have been unconscious for two weeks and need your strength."

Voldemort reared up on the bed Wormtail had conjured. "POTTER!" he spat. "He did this to me! I will make him pay for this!"

He looked around and found that, other than himself and Wormtail, the chamber was empty. "Where are my faithful servants, Wormtail?" he asked in a dangerous tone.

"My Lord, many of your inner circle fled when you did not awaken. For the past ten days I have been the only one here," said Wormtail groveling before him.

Voldemort's eyes smoldered dangerously and he activated his link to his servants, summoning them back to him.

"Is Oogla-Dain still here Wormtail?" he asked.

"Y-Yes, My Lord. He has been awaiting your recovery," replied Wormtail.

"Send for him Wormtail, I would speak with him," Voldemort said in a quite voice.

Wormtail shivered and rushed from the room. A short while later he ran back in, his terror obvious. Running to Voldemort, he dropped to his knees and cowered. The temperature in the room dropped considerably as another figure glided in. The figure approached Voldemort, its visage hidden by a hooded cloak.

"Oogla-Dain, welcome," started Voldemort. "I have a job for you. One which I think you and your brothers will enjoy..."

Quidditch and Wings...

Today, Ron and his Horntails were facing off against the Fireballs. It was a game that Harry had wanted to be there for, but his locket had given him several warning thumps during the day and he had learned not to ignore those warnings. So now he was standing atop the Astronomy tower having told his friends to go off to the game. Ginny had wanted to stay behind, and Ron was annoyed that he wasn't coming to see him play. But, in the end, they all left for the Quidditch pitch.

It would have been cold but the tower had a permanent warming charm on it. The skies were overcast and the clouds were dark and threatening, typical English winter weather. Harry paced back and forth, checking the skies and the castle grounds. He really didn't know what he was looking for.

He was surprised when Serena and Severus came out of the entrance to the observation platform. They were equally surprised to see him.

"Harry, I would have thought you would be down at the pitch watching the game," Serena said.

"Umm... No Professor. But if I'm interrupting something, I can go elsewhere," he replied distractedly while still scanning the skies.

"Is something wrong Harry?" asked Severus.

Harry turned to face them. "I'm not sure, Professor. I have an uneasy feeling and I've been getting warnings," he said.

The two Professors glanced at each other before turning their gazes back to Harry. Severus was about to say something when he noticed Harry's posture had gone rigid. He turned to look in the same direction as Harry. All he could see was a low moving dark cloud, little different than the storm clouds above it.

Serena gasped, then grabbed Severus' arm tightly. "That cloud's moving against the wind."

Harry broke from his shock and quickly gave his ring a twist. "That's not a cloud, those are Dementors! We're under attack," he snarled. Without waiting for a reply, Harry transformed into Wings and vanished in a flash of flame.

Ron had just managed to block another goal attempt by the Fireballs when his ring pulsed wildly. He looked around frantically as students and players stopped what they were doing to glance around. A quaffle sailed right past him to score for the Fireballs, but no one was paying attention. Ron signaled to Madam Hooch for a timeout, but before she noticed his signal, there was a scream from above him.

Wings appeared above the Quidditch pitch and dove for the ground, screaming a warning. He flew low over the stands then turned for the center of the field where he transformed back into Harry Potter.

Harry amplified his voice. "ALL STUDENTS BACK TO THE CASTLE! DEMENTORS ARE ONLY A MINUTE OR TWO AWAY! PHOENIX BRIGADE, TO ME!"

Dumbledore stood in the stands and amplified his voice, "TEACHERS, GET YOUR STUDENTS TO THE GREAT HALL."

Ron flew down to Harry. Dropping his broom, he asked, "How bad is it, Harry?"

"Bad, Ron. There must be thousands of Dementors approaching," he said as Hermione and Ginny joined them.

"We need to hold them off long enough to get the rest of the students inside. I don't know what we'll do after that," Harry said tensely. He knew the Patronus would only drive off a Dementor, not kill it, and there were a lot of Dementors coming.

The brigade quickly separated itself from the rest of the student body and formed up into their squads. The approaching Dementors were visible now, low on the horizon and closing in quickly.

Ron arranged the squads to form a line facing the approaching menace. As the front wave of Dementors came down to ground level, the brigade cast their Patronuses. Harry stepped out in front of the line and joined them, sending Prongs tearing into the front rank of Dementors.

Harry could see they were barely slowing the Dementors down. "Ron, fall back to the wall. Pick up any stragglers on the way," he ordered tersely.

"FALL BACK TO THE WALL! MAINTAIN INTERVALS AND PICK UP ANY STRAGGLERS," Ron bellowed. The command was echoed by the squad leaders and the Phoenix Brigade started to move.

Slowly, the brigade was pushed back. Their Patronuses would buy them some time, and then they would be forced to recast the spell. The problem was the Patronus was a terribly draining spell. One by one, brigade members failed to successfully cast the spell.

By the time they reached the gates, over half of the brigade were exhausted and unable to cast another Patronus. Harry had continued to send Prongs out among the oncoming creatures, but it was getting harder and harder to cast the spell. Ron was carrying Hermione over his shoulder. She had exhausted herself casting and had succumbed to the depressing effects of the Dementors.

Harry placed a hand against the castle wall, breathing heavily. He glanced at Ginny who was leaning up against the wall, her eyes closed, tears streaming down her face. She opened her eyes and looked at Harry. He could see the despair in her eyes. Without saying a word, he knew she was saying goodbye.

Harry's magic flared. His hand, touching the castle wall, burst into light. The light touched the wall and spread around the castle. There was a bell like sound and the sky above Hogwarts filled with flashes of

flame as hundreds of phoenixes appeared. His free hand lashed out and a bright white wave of light hit the front rank of Dementors, causing them to recoil in agony.

The phoenixes dove for the Dementors, talons outstretched. As they dove, they sang a song as one voice, a song of triumph and joy. The combined effect of so many phoenixes singing was incredible. The sound was awesome, as if some huge tear had been opened between this plane and the next and a heavenly choir was singing in exaltation. The Phoenix Brigade took heart from the phoenix song and redoubled their efforts. Even Ginny and Hermione revived enough to cast their Patronuses. Harry's magic surged again and the Dementors in front withered and smoked. Those in the back recoiled from the phoenix song and started to writhe.

Again and again the phoenixes dove and swooped into the packed Dementors, their song decimating the ranks of the dark creatures. Where they struck with their talons, the Dementors cloaks ripped and smoke steamed from the wounds created. Those not hit by talons twisted and thrashed under their awesome song.

Time and again Harry's magic surged and, with each rush of power, the front rank of Dementors died.

The Phoenix Brigade started directing their patronus to encircle the dwindling Dementors. Slowly, the number of terrible creatures dwindled until nothing but foul, smoking cloaks remained.

Harry swayed. He leaned against the wall for a moment, and then opened his eyes. The phoenixes were landing in front of the brigade, sometimes in ones and twos, sometimes twenty or more at a time. He knew what he had to do. Fawkes appeared over his head and sang to him, lulling him.

Harry stepped away from the wall and transformed into Wings. He glided a few feet to the ground and looked out over the massed phoenixes. There were hundreds of them. Behind him stood the Phoenix Brigade, Professor Dumbledore and many of the school's teachers, watching this rare spectacle in awe.

Fawkes circled Wings then landed to face him.

Well done, Fledgling. Today you pushed back the dark in more ways than you can imagine.

Harry could hear a murmuring chorus of agreeing voices in his head.

Thank you, my brothers. I am forever in your debt for your aid. Had it not been for you, things would not have gone well. For myself, my mate and my friends, I thank you. May our nest, always be your nest.

Harry felt the warmth of approval coming from the crowd of great birds.

When the time comes, Fledgling, we will appear again. Stand fast, child of the light. You are not alone.

The thought didn't come from Fawkes, but from a multitude of voices, which echoed in his mind.

As one, the phoenixes took flight, and then vanished in a flash of flame. Fawkes sprang aloft and glided over to land on Dumbledore's shoulder.

Wings turned to face the crowd, which had gathered behind him. His fatigue was extreme. He struggled to force himself back into his normal shape. Slowly and painfully he made the transition to his human form, then he collapsed on the ground.

Dumbledore and several of the other teachers strode forward to assist him. Ginny wanted to go to Harry, but Ron held her back.

"We're all tired Ginny, you as well. Let Dumbledore bring him in this time. Help me with 'Mione while we get everyone back to the castle."

Ginny looked torn, but she was exhausted and still suffering from the depressing effects of the Dementors. She nodded and took Hermione's arm and wrapped it around her shoulders. As a group, the Phoenix Brigade trudged wearily back to Hogwarts. Behind them followed Dumbledore, a few teachers, and a lone figure on a levitated stretcher.

Somewhere in England, Location Unknown...

Voldemort was in fine form. He had spent most of the day torturing members of his inner circle for abandoning him. Oogla-Dain had launched his attack on Hogwarts and soon he'd learn of the results. Voldemort knew that even if there had been thousands of people casting patronuses, they could not really hurt Oogla-Dain and his brothers.

Hogwarts must be a mass tomb by now! He thought gleefully. Even that fool Dumbledore could not hold off that many Dementors! Potter must be dead!

Upstairs in another room, a low level Death Eater was making a report to Wormtail.

"Are you sure of this?" asked Wormtail with a shiver in his voice.

"Yes, Sir. I just came from Hogsmeade. They're saying that the castle was attacked, but there were very few casualties. They're calling for massive amounts of chocolate. Honeydukes is said to be emptied of its supply," replied the Death Eater.

"What else are they saying?" asked Wormtail, his voice taking on a dangerous lilt.

"I overheard two Aurors talking. They said that all of the Dementors that attacked were destroyed. They were quite emphatic about it. None escaped, and the Aurors sounded relieved."

Wormtail's hand snatched up his wand and, before the Death Eater could do anything he shouted, "Imperio!"

He watched for a moment as the curse sunk into the Death Eater before speaking.

"Such devotion to duty must be rewarded. You shall report this news to our Master," sneered Wormtail.

Later that evening, Hogwarts...

Dumbledore walked to the entrance of the Great Hall. It had been turned into a makeshift infirmary. Many of the Phoenix Brigade and other students were suffering from the depressing effects of the Dementors, but there had been few true casualties. A few broken bones caused by the rush to get out of the stands, but no one had been kissed, thank Merlin!

Calls for chocolate and help had been sent out from Hogwarts. Aurors now patrolled the castle grounds, while healers from St. Mungos rushed around dosing people with chocolate. As news of the attack got out, the people from Hogsmeade started showing up at the castle, offering their own personal supply of chocolate. Honeydukes had sent their entire supply up to the castle.

Prefects, armed with calming draughts, were circulating among the first and second years, dosing people as necessary.

Dumbledore stood by the entrance to the Great Hall looking at the students, his students, and he suppressed a shudder thinking of what today could have turned into.

"Albus," said a soft voice behind him.

He turned to see Minerva McGonagall and Amelia Bones. "Albus, I think you need some chocolate, as well," said Minerva, pressing a large piece in his hand. He took the chocolate and nodded at her before taking a small bite.

"Headmaster, things could have gone far worse than they did today," said the Minister.

Slowly, the uplifting effects of the chocolate raised his spirits until his eyes once again twinkled at the two women. Minerva was especially pleased to see this.

"Is it true? Phoenixes and Harry destroyed all those Dementors?" asked Amelia. "We've collected over twenty five hundred Dementor cloaks. That's got to be nearly the entire known Dementor population!"

"Yes, I fear that the results of today's attack are not what Voldemort expected. But it was very close. It was the phoenixes that turned the tide. Harry killed hundreds, but even he would have been overwhelmed had the phoenixes not shown up," replied Dumbledore.

"But Albus, where did they all come from? There were hundreds of them! And what about that strange meeting that took place right after the battle?" asked Minerva while Amelia cocked her head curiously at Dumbledore. She had not heard about that part.

"I have been thinking about that, Minerva. Do you remember the image of the Heart Chamber Harry showed us in the Pensieve?" he asked.

Minerva nodded mutely.

"I have given a lot of thought to those cubbyholes in the walls with the wooden bars. What if they were places for a phoenix to perch? I think that, somehow, the four founders enlisted the aid of phoenixes in building Hogwarts, and those are the perches for them to rest upon. The symbol of the phoenix has always been tied to this school and nearly every Headmaster has had a phoenix companion."

"As to the meeting, alas I fear we will have to wait until Harry awakens before we can find out more," he concluded.

"Will he be alright, Headmaster?" asked Amelia with concern.

Dumbledore nodded, "He is exhausted. His magic nearly spent. I daresay he will need a large amount of chocolate when he awakens, but he took no injuries. Had it not been for him and his brigade, I shudder to think of what today would have brought."

The three of them turned to look at the students who were bedded down in the Great Hall, as an uneasy silence settled over the school.

Hogwarts Infirmary, two days later...

Harry heard a voice. It was distant, but someone was talking. He opened his eyes and blinked at the blurry world that presented itself. A cluster of people was nearby, but he couldn't tell who they were. His hand reached above his head, searching for his glasses, when they were placed in his hand. He put them on and looked up at Madam Pomfrey, blinking.

"You know Mr. Potter, I was just saying to myself the other day that it doesn't seem like a regular school year without an extended visit from my favorite patient," she said with a snort. Obviously, Poppy Pomfrey had a twisted sense of humor.

Ginny raced into the room, but skidded to a halt as Madam Pomfrey glared at her. Running in her hospital indeed!

Madam Pomfrey turned back to Harry and handed him a huge chunk of chocolate. "I expect you to remain in this bed until I release you for dinner, Mr. Potter. In the meantime, I want you to eat that."

Harry looked at the huge piece of chocolate and he shuddered. It must have weighed over a pound! Ginny waited until Madam Pomfrey had returned to her office before she flung herself at Harry. He wrapped his arms around her, burying his nose in her fragrant hair. They held each other for a long time before she pulled away from him. She searched his eyes carefully.

"I'm fine, Gin," he said softly. "I'm just a little tired, that's all."

She smiled at his reassurance and took a seat next to him. A moment later the doors of the infirmary burst open again and Molly rushed in. She swept Harry up in one of her bone crushing hugs.

"I was so worried about you! How are you feeling?" she asked, searching his eyes carefully.

Harry blinked in surprise then looked between the two of them and started to laugh. Like mother, like daughter! Molly took up the seat on the other side of the bed. Then both women frowned at him as he tried to explain what was so funny.

When he was finished, both of them told him to eat his chocolate. Harry chuckled. When both women glared at each other, he collapsed in helpless laughter.

Cleaning the paintings...

"How is the restoration going, Serena?" Severus asked from the doorway of the potions lab in their quarters. It was now early February, and the Dementor attack was nearly a week behind them.

She was bent over one of the paintings, examining its cloudy surface. When she straightened and turned to face him, he could see the weariness in her face.

"It's going well, I think. Aunt Claudia had some good ideas, which I was able to incorporate into a cleaning solution. Thank Merlin these aren't magical paintings. Somehow I don't think the occupant would be pleased by my ministrations," she said with a grimace.

When she reached around and rubbed her lower back, he walked to her and brushed her hands away. Massaging her tired muscles for her, he smiled when she groaned in pleasure. Looking over her shoulder, he gazed at the paintings laid out on the table in front of them. The four paintings had been removed from their frames and were now covered in a hazy, white substance.

The concoction was an enzyme solution they had brewed up a week ago. It smelled horrible, but seemed to do the job. They had needed time to test the solution on small areas of each painting to judge absorption time and penetration, but they'd eventually come up with the right mixture. At least, they hoped.

Serena's Aunt Claudia had been a tremendous help. As an art restorer for the New York Met, and a brilliant witch in her own right, she had been able to give them valuable tips on incorporating the use of magical and muggle techniques in creating a way of cleaning centuries of dirt and grime from the priceless paintings Harry had found.

"How much longer?" he asked, wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her back against him.

Leaning back, she smiled. "Not long," she replied, glancing at the clock.

When she pulled away from him a few minutes later, he let her go and watched. She pulled out her wand and cast a modified cleaning charm. They both smiled when a grungy, dirty haze lifted from all four paintings

and hovered. With a few flicks of her wand, she directed the grimy cloud away from the newly cleaned paintings and into a wastebasket. Tucking her wand away, she approached the paintings again, Severus on her heels.

Before them lay the four newly restored images of Godric Gryffindor. There was some minor damage to each of the paintings, but it was old. The cleaning solution had done its job brilliantly and hadn't added to the damage at all.

"We'll have to get these to the Headmaster's office and let Harry know," Severus said, a bit absent-mindedly, his eyes riveted on one of the images before him.

"Hmm. Yes," she replied, staring at the same image. "Severus, am I mistaken, or is that the hilt Harry's been talking about?"

"You're not mistaken," he replied quietly. "I think that's exactly what he's been looking for."

Chapter 11 - Stress Relief, Notes and Headaches

Blaise and Wan...

Blaise Zabini and Susan Bones were escorting a third year muggle born back to the common room from the library. While the attacks on students at Hogwarts had mostly died down, some of the younger students were unwilling to risk being out by themselves. It was near curfew, and the darkened castle was still an eerie place for muggle born and half blood students.

As the three rounded a corner heading for the stairs, a soft voice called out.

"Blaise?"

Turning, the former Slytherin looked behind him curiously to see Wan Chang walking towards them.

"Miss Chang? What can I do for you?" Blaise asked, cold, but polite.

"May I speak with you for a moment? Alone?" Wan asked, glancing towards Susan and her young charge.

Blaise looked at Susan, who raised an eyebrow and shrugged.

"Susan, would you take Miss Walkins back to the common room while I speak with Miss Chang?"

Susan nodded before placing a hand on Maria Walkins shoulder. "We'll see you later, Blaise. Good evening, Miss Chang," she added civilly.

As the two turned to leave, Blaise faced Wan once more and waited.

"First, I want to thank you. Not very many people are willing to listen to me after what I've done. I know I deserve it, but it's hard."

Blaise nodded, but didn't comment. When Wan continued to look at him, not speaking, he asked, "Was that all, Miss Chang?"

"No. Look, I know now that I made a mistake. I can't believe I fell for Danny and his lies. I didn't know what he was, but I should have. Why else would he say such horrible things? Why else would he want me to hurt other students? But he was the first boy who ever liked me, the first to make me feel special. Everyone talks about Cho and how beautiful she is. No one ever noticed me before. When Danny came along, I fell for it. I would have done anything to make him happy. I was so stupid," she finished quietly.

Blaise leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms, eyeing the young woman before him. She could be lying, but Blaise didn't think so.

"It's a common tactic, Miss Chang. Take a young, vulnerable girl, flatter her and give her everything she feels she's missing in life, be it affection, gifts, attention, whatever. After that, it's rather easy to manipulate her into doing whatever you wish. But then, you know this, don't you?"

She cringed away from him, looking down. "I...yes. Danny was a good teacher," she whispered.

"So what do you want from me, Miss Chang?" he asked curiously.

"I need to talk to Harry Potter," she said, looking up at him with determination. "I need to apologize to him. I'm hoping he'll give me another chance. I know I don't deserve it, but I have to try. I want to make up for what I've done. I know the student's won't trust me. I know I won't be accepted into the Phoenix Brigade, and there's no time for me to learn what I need to know to help fight. But there must be something I can do, some way I can help."

"So why aren't you speaking to Harry about this instead of me?"

"Are you kidding?" she asked, her eyes widening. "If I got anywhere near him, I'd be torn to pieces, either by your security or Ginny Weasley."

"Mr. Potter is able to protect himself from the likes of you, Miss Chang," Blaise said dryly. "You may have surprised him the first time, but that won't happen again. That's something you should keep in mind if you ever get the idea to find yourself another Death Eater boyfriend. Dumbledore may have saved you the first time, but Mr. Potter won't let that happen again."

"That won't happen," she said fiercely. "I know I can't convince anyone with words, but I will not be manipulated again."

He watched her for a moment, staring into her eyes. When she didn't fidget or look away, he nodded. "Very well, Miss Chang. I'll speak to Mr. Potter for you and let you know what he says. He might want to meet with you. If he does, I suggest you don't lie to him, no matter what he asks you."

"I won't. Thank you, Blaise."

Shrugging off her thanks, he straightened. "It's almost curfew. Let's get back to the common room before Filch starts ranting. He hasn't been able to hand out many detentions this term and he's rather put out about it."

Her lips twitched at the joke and she turned towards the stairs as he waved her ahead of him. Things were looking up for Wan, and she felt lighter than she had in days. This might just work!

Revelations and secrets...

Once Harry had learned of the restored portraits, he dragged Ginny with him down to the Snape's private quarters. He had meant to tell them a few things and, to be honest, he wanted Ginny there for moral support.

Knocking, they only had to wait but a minute. Severus opened the door and arched an eyebrow, questioning the presence of Ginny. Harry smiled apologetically, but Severus let them enter anyway.

If Serena was surprised by Ginny being there, she didn't show it.

"Before we get to the paintings, there's something I'd like to show you both. Something that I think you deserve to know. I had planned on waiting, but the other day on top of the astronomy tower I gave away a little too much information," Harry said glancing at Severus.

"Sooner or later, your husband will figure it out. This way, I'll beat him to the punch," he concluded with a smile.

Serena and Severus shared a glance between them. "How about a nice cup of tea?" Serena asked, leading them over to the table and inviting them to sit. Serena poured tea for everyone, then sat, waiting for Harry to speak.

"In the summer between my fifth and sixth years, something happened. A mistake by a goblin, which changed my life drastically," Harry started.

He went on to explain about the letter he received from his parents and its subsequent strange behavior. Then explained how his friends had purchased a locket, which he kept the letter in, and how the locket was what gave him warnings, and sometimes told him what he needed to do. He also explained about how the letter had expanded in content, adding a new section when he had showed it to Molly and Arthur Weasley. Ginny gasped at that, Harry had not told her about the new section. He looked at her in apology.

"It contained a private message for your Mum, Gin. I wasn't sure if it was alright to share it, but I talked with her over the holiday and she said to let you see it as well," he explained.

Harry looked at the two professors. "I'd like to show it to you both. It will explain a few things and, I may be mistaken, but I've gotten the impression that there may be a new message waiting... a message for you, Sir."

Serena leaned forward in interest while Harry fumbled with the clasp of the locket. Getting it free, he placed it on the table and tapped it once with his wand. As had happened previously, an image of the letter appeared above the locket, the words easily readable.

Ginny gasped when the image scrolled up to see the second portion of the letter that was addressed to her parents. The Snapes read the messages avidly. Once everyone had read the second portion, the image scrolled again and a feminine hand began to write.

Harry love,
I am pleased you finally decided to share this with Severus and his lovely wife. Severus, even back when we were children going to Hogwarts and you acted like the biggest prat on campus, I knew you had the makings of a fine man. I am surprised that it took so long for you to figure that out for yourself. I suspect Serena had something to do with that, but that's only right. We women do mold and train our men to behave. Now, I have two men here that wish to say something and it better be the correct thing or I will hex them into next week!

At this point the handwriting changed to a more manly script.

Sev old boy, I'm sorry we ever turned your hair pink and for all the other pranks we pulled on you. I know we didn't see eye to eye on anything, but I'm very grateful for how you've befriended and helped my Godson over the past year. I know we'll probably never like each other, but I do thank you for helping Harry.

Sirius Black

Then the script changed again.

Severus, I'd like to think that if we were still there today, we'd have a relationship like you have with Harry. Like Sirius, I'm sorry for pranking you so much, especially the time we made you blow up the potions lab. I'm glad you finally stopped seeing me in my son. He's a fine man unto himself, although he doesn't pull enough pranks.

OUCH! Stop that Lily.

Anyway, we've all watched with pride as you and Harry managed to put your differences aside and work together. For that, you have my eternal gratitude.

James Potter

The writing then reverted to the feminine, flowing script of Harry's mother.

Harry, the charm I placed on this parchment is nearly exhausted. We can still use it to help advise you. Know that we all love you and miss you terribly. You have grown into a fine man and we are so very proud of you. Take care of Ginny, she's the source of your strength. Ginny, take care of my little green eyed monster.

Lily Potter

Harry grew a little misty eyed at the last part. Ginny reached up to wipe away the tear running down his cheek. After another moment the image collapsed back into the locket.

Severus let out an explosive breath and sat back in his chair like he'd been punched in the stomach. Serena reached out took his hand.

"Merlin!" he exclaimed, then ran a hand through his hair.

"Severus," Serena said softly looking at him with worry written in her eyes. "Are you alright?"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine Serena. I just never thought I'd see the day... to think, a charm that reaches beyond the grave... incredible! If anyone could have done it, it would have been Lily Potter. Her knowledge of charms was phenomenal. This explains much." He looked at Harry speculatively. "Like why you and the Headmaster fought at the beginning of last year and why you still have problems trusting him. Am I right, Harry?"

Harry refused to meet his eyes, but replied anyway. "It's hard to forgive and forget what I went through with the Dursleys Sir. He knew about it all along. He may not have been the one to hit me, but he never lifted a finger to stop it either. I've tried hard to put it behind me, but sometimes it still catches me off guard. He also hid my heritage from me. Had I known sooner, Sirius might still be alive."

Severus nodded. "Yes, I can see how it would be hard to trust after that."

Serena interrupted. "Severus, did you really blow up the potions lab? I wonder what Mr. Longbottom would think about that?" she teased.

Severus shot his wife a look that said, 'Don't you dare!' and both Serena and Ginny laughed.

Serena turned back to Harry. "So that's what you meant by getting warnings? The locket has been somehow advising you?" she asked.

Harry nodded. "Yes. When there's a problem coming, it sort of thumps against my chest. Other times, when I don't know whether or not to do something, it tells me it's all right to do something by getting warm. Do you remember last year when we first started working on the Protean? The locket told me I could trust you both with the information."

Serena leaned across the table and touch Harry's hand. "You've shared so many secrets with us over the past year Harry, but this one is perhaps the most special. I realize how personal and important this is to you. And I don't think it will hurt any that Severus may be able to finally find some closure with a part of his life that has pained him for a long time. We both thank you for that."

She looked at her husband, knowing full well that tonight would be a night for one of 'those' discussions. Severus nodded mutely in agreement.

Harry fumbled with his locket, trying to put it back on. Ginny intervened and helped him. He shot her a grateful smile for her help. That blasted clasp always gave him trouble!

"Now, let's finish our tea and we'll go look at those paintings," said Serena with a smile.

The four of them sat for a while over their tea, talking of inconsequential items. Harry seemed almost reluctant to see the portraits. Serena mentioned how she was surprised to see Wan Chang when they brought in a muggle born student who had been beaten up. Wan had assisted Madam Pomfrey, and then sat with the boy while the potions took effect, helping keep him calm. Harry told the Snapes that he had talked to Wan briefly during his infirmary stay and realized the predicament she was in now. She knew a few of the people who were behind the continuing attacks and was afraid for her own life.

"Harry, what is the difference between Wan Chang and Draco Malfoy?" asked Severus, wondering if the young man truly saw the difference.

Harry took a sip of his tea then leaned back in his chair. "I think Sir, that it boils down to the fact that from day one, Draco was taught that he was superior to half bloods and muggle born. Wan Chang didn't come from that kind of environment, she got tricked into it. Oh, I don't think she's entirely blameless, and I'm don't agree with the Headmaster in what her punishment should be, but I know what it's like to be tricked by someone..." His voice trailed off and Ginny reached over to take his hand.

Severus nodded his agreement. When Serena gave him a questioning look, he glanced at Harry, who shrugged.

"At the end of Harry's fifth year, he was tricked by Voldemort into thinking his Godfather was captured and being tortured in a subbasement at the Ministry of Magic. Harry led a group of students to rescue his Godfather, only to find out it was a trap. When help finally arrived, Harry was the only student still uninjured, but he watched his Godfather murdered in front of his eyes," Severus explained quietly.

Serena's eyes widened, then she turned to Harry who only shrugged.

"I've had an interesting school career..." He turned to Ginny. "I should warn you, you're probably going to have to do some fancy convincing to get me to send our kids here," he said with a grin.

"Interesting school career is putting it mildly, Harry," said Serena with a snort. "I'm not sure you've had a single normal month in this school, let alone a full year."

"I'd like to see you explain to the Headmaster your reasons for sending our children to another school when you're teaching here, Harry. I'm sure he'll find them most amusing," Ginny told him, causing Harry to wince.

A soft pinging sound suddenly echoed throughout the room. As one, the group turned towards the source of the sound.

One wall of the room turned blank and the words, 'Brought to by Weasley Wizarding Wheezes! Diagon Alley, Coming Soon to Hogsmeade!' scrolled over it. The image faded, only to be replaced with a picture of a room. It contained a small round table with two chairs and a checkered tablecloth. The image remained still for a moment, then the door opened...

Who's the romantic now?...

Ron breathed a sigh of relief. With Harry and Ginny out of his hair for a few hours, he could finally have some time alone with Hermione. There was only one problem. Privacy, or lack thereof. He couldn't use the Room of Requirement, as Neville and Luna were running some first aid training sessions for fourth year volunteers. The Astronomy tower was just too popular, especially in winter with its permanent warming charm. So in desperation, he had gone to his brothers, yes, those brothers, asking if they had a cozy room that Hermione and he could use for a few hours of privacy.

Ron watched Harry and Ginny leave for their meeting with the Snapes, and then he made his decision. Hermione was sitting at a nearby table working on her Arithmancy report.

"Mione, would you like to take a walk with me?" he asked.

She looked up at him. "Ron, you know I have to get this report done."

"Aw, come on, 'Mione. A walk will do you some good," he said, giving her his best pleading look.

She looked at him, thinking. With a shrug, she decided maybe a short break wouldn't hurt much. She placed her homework in her bag and stood up, taking his hand. Ron led her from the common room towards the main entrance.

Puzzled, Hermione allowed Ron to lead her out of the castle and over to the Warbangers building. He pulled her inside and ducked into a room she had not visited before.

Ron had spent some time preparing this room so it was just right. He didn't trust his brothers, so he had asked Dobby to prepare a light snack and that he'd be called when they were ready for it.

Inside the room was a small round table with a checkered red and white tablecloth. In one corner stood some enchanted, self-playing instruments. A candle adorned the table and sconces lined the walls.

When Ron assisted Hermione into her seat, she found herself bemused. Ron was being romantic and succeeding?

Neither of them noticed the soft glow coming from one of the sconces on the wall.

He called for Dobby in a soft voice and the little elf appeared, Winky at his side. Dobby placed plates and a platter of cheeses and meats in front of them. He then snapped his fingers at the instruments in the corner and they started playing softly. Winky put an ice bucket, containing a bottle of muggle champagne, on the table. Then she put two champagne glasses next to the bucket.

With soft pops, the two elves vanished. Hermione's eyes widened when she saw the bottle of bubbly. "Ron... is that?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said with a blush. "I asked Harry and he said it was pretty common to celebrate a romantic evening with...champagne?" His brows furrowed in confusion over the unfamiliar word.

Ron got up and walked around the small table. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a small ring box, then he sank down on one knee and looked up at Hermione. She turned to face him, her hands in her lap. Her eyes misted over as he took one of her hands in his.

"Hermione Jane Granger, will you marry me?" he asked softly, his heart in his eyes.

She blushed and looked deep into his eyes. "I'd like that very much, Ron," she replied as he opened the box and pulled out the ring.

As if on cue, the perfect evening he'd planned went suddenly wrong. It started simply, harmlessly. He dropped the ring.

Hermione ducked down to pick it up just as he sprang to his feet to see where it had gone. Their heads collided.

Ron sank to his knees, holding his head and Hermione rocked backwards, holding hers. Both of them groaned and looked at each other before they started to laugh.

Ron reached down and picked up the ring, placing it on her finger. Hermione gave a shout of joy and lunged into his unprepared arms. Ron, caught off guard, fell backwards, bouncing his head against the hard stone floor. It took Hermione a moment to realize she was kissing an unconscious man. Checking the back of his head, she leaned over him, waiting.

When he came to, Hermione was still leaning over him, her face filled with concern over what she had done. He pulled her into an embrace, startling a squeak from her. He kissed her with a passion he had never felt before. She melted against him, returning his kiss. When she ran her hands through his hair, he winced. Pulling away from him, Hermione stood and offered him a hand up, which he gratefully accepted.

They returned to their seats, Ron a little unsteady on his feet. He reached for bottle of champagne and eyed the complex bottle top warily.

"You peel the foil off Ron, then gently work the cork out with your thumbs," Hermione offered. Yes, we had a bit of a rocky start, she thought, but this is turning out to be a wonderful evening!

Ron nodded gratefully to her, then stopped for a moment to gaze into her chocolate brown eyes again. With a shake of his head he broke free from her gaze and started to peel the foil away from the neck of the bottle. That was the easy part. The cork wasn't a cork, it was some soft of muggle white thing, and it was rock hard and stuck!

Placing the bottle between his legs for more leverage, he rocked the cork back and forth. When the cork finally shot free from the bottle, it ricocheted off the ceiling and hit Hermione in the forehead. The bottle sprayed champagne in a frothing fountain, soaking Ron's pants.

Hermione blinked as the bottle opened and the cork hit her. She was about to say something to Ron when she noticed him turning a strange purplish color. His head sank down to the puddle on the table, his breath ragged.

"Ron!" she exclaimed in concern.

She leapt from her seat in such a rush that she tilted the table. It rocked back and forth several times, smacking Ron in head repeatedly.

She knelt by his side and gasped. He had been holding the base of the bottle against his crouch as he opened it. When the cork flew out, the bottle had smashed downwards.

"Mione?" Ron croaked.

"Yes, Ron?" she replied her eyes full of worry.

"I think I broke my dangly bits!" he groaned.

She pulled the bottle from his hands and gently pulled him into her arms. "Do you want to go to Madam Pomfrey? I'm sure she has a potion..."

"No!" he exclaimed, looking at her in shock.

"Well, I could kiss them and make them better," she suggested wickedly.

He eyed her in astonishment. Seeing his expression, she giggled.

Once Ron had recovered, they repaired the damage and were once again seated, sharing a glass of champagne and the platter Dobby had prepared.

Neither noticed that one wall sconce had stopped glowing.

Back to the Snapes...

Harry and Ginny were holding each other, laughing. Serena had nearly fallen out of her chair several times, and Severus was openly grinning. From the sounds coming from the hallway, it was obvious that more than one wall had been displaying the images from Ron's little adventure.

"Shall we check out the portraits now?" asked Serena, finally calming down.

"I think so. I want to check them out then get over to the Great Entrance to meet Ron and 'Mione when they get back," replied Harry with an evil grin.

With that, she led them to the private potions lab where the paintings were kept.

Harry's eyes were immediately drawn to one painting. He pulled out his sketchpad and started drawing the hilt more closely.

'Harry, is that..." asked Ginny.

Harry nodded with a huge smile. "Yes Gin, it is. Now the real question is, what activates it? An incantation? A movement?" he replied.

"You may be over complicating it, Harry. It is, after all, a sword. It could be something as simple as activating on contact with blood," offered Severus.

"Yes! That makes sense Professor!" said Harry.

Harry took the one portrait of interest, shrunk it down along with his sketch pad and put them in a pocket. "I daresay the Headmaster will be pleased to have these three portraits back. I'll give him the one I have after I've finished making my sketches. I have a much clearer idea of what I have to do now," he said.

Thanking the Snapes, Harry and Ginny left the apartment and headed towards the entrance. It was apparent from the crowd that they weren't the only people wanting to wish the happy couple well.

Ron and Hermione...

Ron and Hermione left the room at Warbangers. As they did, they couldn't help but wonder about the laughter coming from a nearby room. Hermione looked at Ron suspiciously. Ron could only shrug his shoulders.

"They're probably laughing over some new thing they've invented," he said. "You know those two."

As they crossed the courtyard in the deepening light, they heard a shrill whistling noise coming from the building they'd just left. A single rocket launched from the building and into the night sky above the castle.

When they stopped to watch it, Ron had a sinking feeling that maybe, just maybe, asking his brothers for help was a bad idea. That thought was confirmed a moment later when the rocket exploded and the words 'CONGRATULATIONS RON AND HERMIONE' floated above the castle in huge flaming letters.

Hermione groaned and clutched Ron's arm. "I'm going to kill them!" she hissed in anger.

Approaching the entrance to the castle, they noted the large crowd of grinning people and stopped. Harry and Ginny stepped forward and dragged the happy couple forward.

"Hey mate, congratulations! But you really want to watch out for your dangly bits, if you know what I mean. After all, what good is a marriage if you have damaged bits?" Harry asked with a grin.

It took a moment for Harry's words to sink in. When they did, Hermione turned on Ron.

"I'M GOING TO KILL THEM," she shouted.

Harry looked at her and laughed. "It wasn't all the twins' fault, Hermione. Lover boy here should have never gone and asked for their help. But come on, we have a party going in the common room and you two are the guests of honor."

Hermione calmed down somewhat as Lavender, Parvati, Susan and several other girls rush up, demanding to see the ring. She shot another angry glare at Harry who winked back at her as she allowed herself to be led back to the common room.

Back to the Snapes, later that night...

Serena rolled over restlessly, muttering as the blankets twisted around her legs. She had been dozing on and off for the last few hours, but true sleep hadn't come. She had thought Severus wanted to talk tonight, but when she broached the subject with him after Harry and Ginny had left, he had snapped at her and retreated to the library to grade papers. She had taken the hint and left him to it.

She went to bed alone that night, knowing he would join her in his own good time. When he had finally slid in beside her, he had remained awake and tense while she tried to drift off. Now, as she untangled her legs from the blanket, she noticed the bed beside her was empty.

With a sigh, she grabbed his pillow and hugged it to her tightly. She knew they would both sleep better if he'd only talk about it. But trying to force Severus Snape to do something he didn't wish to do was a Herculean task, and she just didn't have the energy for it. Besides, she was never at her best when she hadn't had enough sleep. So she lay in the darkness, letting her mind drift.

She wasn't sure how long she had lain there. It could have been hours or minutes. But the background hum was beginning to bother her. It was something she'd never told Severus about, but when he was in a broody, dark mood like this, she could feel him in the back of her mind. It was like an itch one couldn't reach, but longed to scratch.

Giving up, she sat up, pulling her knees into her chest. Why couldn't he have done this earlier?

"Severus?" she called softly, knowing he was there, but unable to see him.

"I didn't mean to wake you."

"Well, you did. You think to loud!"

There was a startled silence before he replied. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing, I'm not fully awake yet. Now, would you like to talk about it, or continue to brood?" she asked grumpily.

"Go back to sleep, Serena," he said coldly.

Damn! He's going to brood, which will make him more pissy than usual, and I'll never get any sleep, she thought. Time to wake up and start banging my head into the wall that is Severus Snape, Snarky Bastard.

Climbing out of bed, she grabbed her night robe and put it on against the chill. Working her way cautiously towards his voice, she found him by the simple means of stumbling into his back. She moved around in front of him and leaned her back against his chest. When he didn't move, she grumbled a bit and reached for his arms, folding them around her waist. When she started to shiver from the cold, he tightened his arms, causing her to smile.

"You know, if we're going to stand here, we might as well have something to look at," she said as she reached out and pulled the drapes away from the window. "How you can stand to stare at nothing in the dark is beyond me," she added with a yawn as moonlight filtered into the room.

"I didn't want to wake you," he replied softly.

"And that worked so well," she murmured lightly, snuggling back into this warmth. "So, tell me," she said when he remained silent.

"I don't know where to start," he said simply.

"The beginning, of course. I know some of it, but that's come from others, and mostly through the eyes of adults. Tell me about your time at Hogwarts."

And so went the third confession of Severus Snape. Serena knew many of the ugly things he'd done in his past as a Death Eater. It was something he had insisted on before they married. He refused to allow her to tie herself to him without knowing the worst. Two weeks before their marriage, he had shared the worst of his actions with her via a Pensieve. He had thought he would lose her after that. When she hadn't turned from him, he had vowed then that he would never let her go.

He had become a Death Eater during his seventh year, at the age of seventeen, as his father expected. Very few members of the Snape family strayed from the dark. It had been so for centuries. With Voldemort's first rise to power, the Snape family had been one of the first to follow him. While not quite as rich as the Malfoy family, the Snape's, it was said, were more truly Slytherin in nature than any other. The Dark Lord was no fool. With the Malfoy money and the Snape's intelligence, his plans were sure to succeed.

While it was true that Severus could have avoided taking the Dark Mark by appealing to Dumbledore, his experiences at Hogwarts had taught him that the only thing that mattered was power. It was his continual run-ins with the Marauders that solidified that belief.

The loathing the four Gryffindor's felt for him was entirely mutual. Their constant pranks and his retaliation against them followed through all their years at Hogwarts. While the four focused on his appearance, Severus focused on their one weakness. Lupin. Werewolf and half blood combined, worthy of contempt in his mind. While he included them all in his petty revenge for their tricks, he always added an extra twist, designed to torment Lupin.

In later years, Severus came to realize that it was this, more than anything else, which caused Black to lure him to the Shrieking Shack that night. Black had grown tired of Snape's constant baiting of his friend and thought it a fitting revenge to scare the young Slytherin with a confrontation of that which he claimed to loath so much. If James Potter had not saved him that night, Snape would have died, or worse, been turned.

Unable to let the incident go, he took the Dark Mark gladly. With the power of the Dark Lord behind him, the Marauders would be easily dealt with. He may have owed James Potter a life debt, but he owed nothing to Black, Lupin or Pettigrew.

Circumstances changed however, and in his seventh year, he came to know Lily Evans better. Her association with Potter was unfortunate in his mind, but he was able to put his feelings aside for her sake. They avoided talking about the Marauders when they spent time together, usually studying. She was intelligent, witty and very beautiful.

"Did you love her?" Serena interrupted to ask quietly.

"Yes, but not in the way that you mean. Lucius was a friend of sorts, but it always came with conditions. It was to his advantage to be on friendly terms with my family and he chose to do so through me. If that advantage ever disappeared, so would the friendship."

"Lilly was different. She never asked for anything in return. Simple companionship, a study partner, someone who understood how important schoolwork was to her. She didn't know what I had become of course. At least, not then. She was... my friend."

He became aware of just how wrong his dark choice had been upon graduating. After the graduation celebration at Hogwarts, his father took him to his first Dark Revel. The experiences of that night were burned into his soul. The screams of the victims still echoed down through the years to haunt him.

It wasn't long after that he approached Dumbledore and confessed all. He expected to be turned over to the Aurors and sent to Azkaban. Instead, he found absolution and a new purpose. What he hadn't expected was the subtleness of the Headmaster in twisting Severus to meet his own needs. Thus, Severus Snape, Death Eater became Severus Snape, spy and Potion Master. There were many things that he regretted throughout the years, but his decision to turn spy was not one of them.

He later joined the Order and once more found himself in the company of the Marauders. Much as he detested their presence, he was happy to see Lily again. She had married James and was pregnant. They renewed their friendship quietly. While James never understood what his wife saw in Severus, he chose not to interfere. That was something Severus was thankful for, though he would never admit it to anyone, not even Lily.

Severus had not been told when Voldemort decided to attack the Potters. He had found out about it from Lucius, but it was too late. When he had arrived at the house in Godric's Hollow, it was a charred, burning wreck, the Morsmordre floating menacingly overhead.

What good was being a spy then, if he couldn't even save a friend?

He found James first, but had hoped Lily might have survived. That hope was crushed when he finally stumbled upon her body. For the first time in many years, he wept. He wept for the friendship he'd lost, for the bright witch who's life had ended so early.

After laying her body near James, he searched for her child. When he found no trace of the boy, he returned to Hogwarts, where Dumbledore had informed him that young Harry was safe.

He grieved privately in the weeks that followed. He also developed an irrational anger towards James Potter. If the man had taken proper steps to safeguard his wife and child, Lily would still be alive. But James, ever the Gryffindor, had refused to leave England. He put his faith in the Fidelius Charm. Severus could not forgive him that stupidity.

He also came to hate Harry. If the boy had not been born, there would not have been a prophecy and, once again, Lily would still be alive. It didn't help his anger that young Harry looked so much like his father. But he had Lily's eyes. Every time Severus looked into the boy's emerald gaze, he saw Lily, and his own failure.

"And the letter brought that all back?" Serena asked when he remained silent for several minutes.

"To some extent. The loss and sense of failure will always be with me, Serena. I've learned to live with it."

"Then what is it? What has you so broody tonight?"

Severus sighed. "You'll think it childish."

"We all have our childish moments, Severus. You more than others, of course." She chuckled when he squeezed her tightly and growled in her ear. "Come on, tell me," she prodded. "I'll try not to laugh."

"As I told Harry, Lily was extremely gifted in charms and that letter was something young Harry needed very badly. A connection to parents he never had a chance to know."

"But?" Serena asked.

"But did she have to let James and Black add to it? She had to know how much I'd hate letting them have the last word!"

Serena blinked as understanding slowly dawned her. After all the grief and heartache he'd been through, he was angry over not having the last word?

"What?" she yelled, spinning to face him. "Are you telling me that all this brooding, snapping at me earlier tonight and your pissy mood is because Potter and Black got the last word?"

Looking down into her furious face, he grimaced. "I told you that you'd find it childish," he muttered.

"Childish?" she said, poking him in the chest. "It is beyond childish, Severus Snape! They thanked you," she reminded him, poking him once more and causing him to back up a few steps. "They're happy you're here for Harry!" She marched after him, intent on poking him once more, but he retreated further.

She continued to stalk him around the room as he backed away, venting her anger at his behavior. He watched her, amused and aroused by turns. She was beautiful in her anger, her skin bathed in soft moonlight, her white hair glowing in the dim room.

She caught him as the back of his knees came up against the edge of the bed. She shoved him down and straddled his hips. Looking down at him, she told him exactly what she thought of his behavior, questioned his parentage, asked if his mother had ever mated with a jackass or if he'd ever been dropped on his head as a child. She stopped when she finally noticed he was grinning at her.

"This isn't funny, Severus," she said heatedly. "Why are you grinning like an idiot?"

In answer, he grabbed her hips with both hands and pulled her tightly against him. When her eyes widened in understanding, he ground his pelvis against hers. Realizing her error, she tried to scramble off him, but he turned, still holding her, and pinned her down on the bed.

"I'm not finished, Severus," she ground out between clenched teeth.

"And I haven't begun," he replied, lowering his mouth to her lips.

"This isn't over," she muttered against his mouth.

"I certainly hope not," he said, thrusting against her.

"Damn," she murmured, wrapping her arms around his neck. "I hate it when you do this."

"Would you like me to stop?"

"Shut up and kiss me!"

Grimmauld Place...

It was late but Remus was still awake. Jason had come down with a bad cold and Tonks, with much advice from Molly, was helping him get through it. Remus wandered around the big old house before deciding to head down to the main conference room the Order used to monitor Voldemort.

There weren't many people there, considering the hour. Just a couple monitoring 'The Map'. He hadn't checked the map since he and Harry had fought over Peter Pettigrew. Pettigrew's name appeared and vanished like clockwork from the map, rarely staying in one place for long.

Now he looked up at it, surprised to see that, in the months since he had last looked at it, Order members had tagged nearly two hundred of Voldemort's Death Eaters.

"They're finally starting to converge. Maybe we'll get lucky and be able to pick up several intact cells before April," said a voice behind him.

Remus whirled around to see Hestia Jones. "Sorry Remus, I didn't mean to startle you. I just came off duty and wanted to check the map before I grab a bit of sleep for myself," she said.

"It's ok Hestia, I just didn't expect anyone sneaking up on me," he replied.

She pointed to the map again. "Jack thinks that Voldemort will have all his pieces in place three to five days in advance of his attack," she said.

Remus grinned. Harry had made him aware of Hestia's interest in Jack Parsons. Remus thought that, if anyone could break through the tough guy's defenses, it would be Hestia. "Speaking of Jack, how are things going with him? I don't get up to Hogwarts as much as I'd like to see him and Harry."

Hestia smiled mysteriously. "He's doing well, now that he's gotten over the shock that a witch might be interested in him. I never thought I could be interested in a squib, but there is something about him, a kind of power and confidence I've never felt before in anyone, except maybe Dumbledore. It's as if he knows who he is and exactly what he can do."

Remus looked thoughtful. "He's tested himself in the worst kind of muggle conflicts possible, Hestia. That's got to show a man what he's made of."

She nodded thoughtfully and went back to studying the map.

Meeting with Wan...

Harry stood upon the Astronomy tower, looking over the peaceful grounds of Hogwarts. The full moon cast its gentle light upon the lake, and he could just make out the waves as the giant squid broke the surface.

The tower door opened behind him and he turned to see Blaise Zabini and Wan Chang step out. He nodded to them both as Blaise closed the door, warded it against eavesdropping and leaned back against the castle wall.

"Good evening, Miss Chang. Blaise informed me that you wish to speak to me?" Harry asked.

She approached him nervously and stuffed her hands into her coat pockets. Seeing her actions, Blaise straightened and narrowed his eyes. When Harry waved him off, Wan turned back to look at him.

"I didn't bring my wand. Professor Dumbledore still has it," she told the brigade's security officer anxiously.

Blaise nodded and relaxed against the wall once more.

Facing Harry, noting his calm, curious expression, she let out a soft sigh. This might not be as difficult as she first thought.

"Thank you for meeting with me," she said quietly.

When he only nodded and waited for her to continue, she took a deep breath, sent a silent prayer to anyone listening and began.

"First, I want to apologize for what I did, not only to you, but also to the other students. They're not willing to listen to me, but I know I deserve that. I asked Blaise to speak with you first because I wasn't sure if I would be allowed to approach you, or if you'd even listen to me if I did."

"Allowed to approach me?" he questioned with a scowl.

"Well, between Blaise and his people and Ginny Weasley, I figured I wouldn't be allowed anywhere near you. After what I did to you, I don't blame them."

"Blaise wouldn't have stopped you, but it's true that Ginny might have," he said with a grin as he glanced over her shoulder and into the shadows. "She may be working on her temper, but I think she'd be more than happy to have a few goes at you, Miss Chang. I don't think she's forgiven you yet."

"And you, Harry?" she asked.

"Forgiveness is something that's earned, Wan," he said gently.

When she flinched as if struck, he sighed and dragged a hand through his hair. "But I also know what it's like to be tricked. For you, it earned you the scorn of your family and fellow students. It cost me the life of someone I loved."

Seeing the pain in his eyes, she nodded in understanding. He hadn't said it, but she knew he was willing to forgive her past actions.

Harry looked out over the grounds once more and continued in a quiet voice. "I watched you while I was in the infirmary, you know. You displayed an empathy that was rather surprising when compared to your earlier actions. I don't know if you'll ever earn back the trust that you lost Wan, but I know you're trying."

"Thank you," she replied, softly.

"Was there anything else you wanted to talk about?" he asked.

"Yes. I want to help. Like I told Blaise, I know I can't help in the actual fighting. With my skills, I think I would only drag everyone down. But since I've been working with Madam Pomfrey, I thought maybe I could be of use. I know what's coming and I want to do my part, if you'll let me."

"I'm sure Madam Pomfrey would be pleased to have your help. Have you discussed this with her?"

"No, I wanted to talk to you about it first. When the time comes, those who are injured probably won't want me anywhere near them. I didn't want it to be a surprise."

"Good point," he said wryly. "I'll talk to the brigade and let them know you're working with her."

When she smiled her thanks, he held up a warning hand and added, "A lot of the younger students are afraid of you, Wan. And many of the others are still very angry. This isn't going to be easy for you."

"It shouldn't be," she said. "Few things worth doing are. They may not forgive me, but it won't stop me from trying to help."

He looked into her dark eyes for several moments, probing. She didn't blink or look away, simply accepting whatever happened. When he broke eye contact with her, she blinked several times and exhaled the breath she didn't know she'd been holding. She shuddered once, then reached up and touched her temple.

"One more thing, Wan," he added. She stilled as she heard the coldness in his voice.

"Yes?" she asked.

"If you ever cross the line again, I'll find out. If you ever purposely harm another person, neither Dumbledore, nor the Ministry will be able to save you from me. Do you understand?"

"I understand," she said warily.

"Was there anything else?"

"No, that's all. And...thank you, Harry."

"Welcome back, Wan," he said with a small smile.

After Blaise escorted the girl from the tower, Harry leaned against the wall and sighed. He hadn't been able to detect a lie from her, but time would tell. He couldn't monitor her every move, nor did he wish to. He hoped his warning, false as it may have been, would go a long way in keeping her honest. If she did cross the line, there was a good chance that he wouldn't find out about it. However powerful he may be, he wasn't omnipotent.

When small arms wrapped around his waist, he grinned.

"Hiding in shadow's doesn't really suite you, love," he said, turning in her embrace.

"I wanted to hear what she had to say," Ginny said with a shrug.

"And?" he asked.

"I don't trust her. After what she did to you, I don't know if I ever will. But it has to start somewhere, doesn't it?"

Harry looked at her in surprise. "Yes, it does. I just never thought I'd hear you say that."

"Why?" she asked with a scowl.

"Ginevra Weasley holding her temper and willing to give Wan Chang a chance? I think I hear the sound of hell freezing over," he teased.

"Prat!" she said, smacking his chest gently.

He laughed and pulled her close. "I love you, Gin. Thanks for being here."

"Always," she said, simply.

Late Night Worries...

It was late, and Ginny was on a mission. For the fourth time in as many nights, she woke up and found Harry gone from the bed. She was knew where he'd be. The first two nights she had lain awake, waiting for him to

return. But last night she had went searching for him, only to find him walking the castle battlements. And that's where she expected to find him again.

As she walked towards the main entrance of the castle, a hand reached out to touch her shoulder. Instantly she spun, wand out. She only relaxed after seeing it was Harry's friend, Jack Parsons.

"Easy, girl. I'm not going to hurt you so put that chop stick back into your pocket," he said.

She pocketed her wand and Jack nodded towards the window were they both could see Harry walking the wall.

"You're going out to bring him in again, right Ginny?" asked Jack.

She sighed, looking at the figure in the distance. "Yes I was, Professor," she replied. "I don't know why he's sleeping so little these days. I try to help him but..." She trailed off in frustration.

"Ginny, he's worried and it's beginning to affect him and everyone around him. Think of it this way. Everyone's getting ready for this coming battle, including Harry, but a lot of us know the truth. Harry is going to have to fight Voldemort alone. The rest of us are merely pieces on a chessboard and Harry feels responsible for us. He's worried. He's worried that someone won't do their job, or he'll fail, or someone he loves will get hurt. It's twisting and knotting him up inside."

"He and I have talked about this before, and he has a better understanding of what he's feeling, but that doesn't make how he feels any easier. Take yourself, Ginny. I know for a fact he'd love to send you someplace safe, but he won't. He respects you too much to do that to you. So, instead he worries and it keeps him up late nights, it affects his appetite."

"He knows he shouldn't, but he can't help it. I heard your friend Hermione complain the other day that Harry's got a 'saving people thing'. But there's something you all need to realize. It's not a 'thing'. It's who he is. It's a part of him, just like his green eyes or messy hair. I've known men like him who had a 'saving people' thing and even when they aren't saving people, they are worrying about them. Think on it, Ginny. Understand that it's part of who he is as sure as the blood in his body."

Ginny blinked in surprise at Jack. She had dealt with him in Advanced Defense class and on a limited personal basis. And while she acknowledged he was a superb teacher, as well as a good friend to Harry, she never knew him capable of such insightfulness.

"So what should we do, Professor? This can't be healthy for him and sooner or later it's going to affect not only him, but everyone around him," she said, the concern obvious in his voice.

"Well, I have a few ideas, but I'll need to talk to the Headmaster. In the meantime, there are a few things you and your friends can do. First, don't let him skip any meals." When she nodded in understand, Jack continued with a grin. "Second, and you should enjoy this part, get him to bed earlier. I don't care if you play poker with him in bed, but get him to relax. Go easy on him, Ginny. He needs the strength you and your friends give him."

He watched Ginny intently, hoping she understood what he was telling her. She gazed at the dark figure that stood on the battlements, staring off into the night. Then she looked at Jack, smiled and nodded her understanding. He returned her smile, touched her shoulder lightly, then turned and walked away.

Harry stopped and leaned into the crenel. His gaze fixed on the road leading up to the castle gates. In his minds eye he could see the approaching Death Eaters and the ensuing battle. He examined move and counter move in his imaginary scenario and pondered several 'what if' situations.

His dreams, of late, had become particularly graphic. In them, he'd win against Voldemort, only to find that everyone he loved was dead. Ron, Hermione and Ginny. Dumbledore, Fred, George, and so many more...all dead.

He shivered and tried to crush that image mercilessly from his mind. The urge to seek out Voldemort and have it done before April had been growing strong in him. It lured and pulled at him like a seductive dream, promising an end and peace.

A pair of arms wrapped around him and the tension drained out of him. He leaned back slightly, feeling familiar warmth.

"Hey Gin," he said softly.

"Couldn't sleep again?" she asked.

He shook his head. "The nightmares have been getting too bad of late. Plain old fashioned nightmares. Strange how something so normal can affect one, isn't it?" he replied.

She tightened her grip on him. "Why didn't you wake me?" she asked gently.

He turned in her arms and looked down at her. "I didn't want to disturb your sleep just because I'm having a silly nightmare. It doesn't mean you have to get up," he replied.

Ginny sighed in exasperation. "Oh Harry, do you ever listen to yourself? It's ok to have a nightmare, and it's ok to want someone to talk to afterwards. I don't care what time it is, Harry Potter. If you have a nightmare that wakes you up, you wake me! Understand?" she asked fiercely.

"Temper, Miss Weasley," he reminded her teasingly.

With a growl, she shook him. "Stop changing the subject and answer the question."

Harry chuckled. "Yeah, I understand."

"Good. Now we're going back to bed and you're going to sleep. Tomorrow we'll talk about these nightmares," she told him.

Headmaster's Office, the next morning, before breakfast...
Dumbledore looked up from his desk at the knock on his door.

"Enter," he called.

Jack Parsons entered, chuckling to himself. "You know Headmaster; I know some people at the security office in Quantico who would just love your gargoyle. If you ever want to make a killing as a defense contractor, I'll be happy to set you up with them," he said.

Dumbledore waved the man to a seat. He liked this strange squib, but he admitted to himself that he sometimes said the strangest things.

"Professor, one of these days I think you and I will have a long talk, but alas, that day will have to wait. What, may I ask, brings you here this morning?" asked Dumbledore.

Jack leaned back in his chair. "Well Sir, it's like this. I spent the last ten years of my career commanding troops. During that time I learned a lot about the type of pressure that sort of job puts on a person. Right

now, you have a problem. You have a command team that's watching its commander kill himself with worry. The whole group is sitting in a pressure cooker and everyone's waiting for the lid to blow."

Dumbledore looked pained. "I take it you mean Harry and his friends? It's true his teachers have informed me that Harry's work has started to slip, and I am not unaware of his late night walks. Tell me Professor, since you've been in his shoes, what do you suggest?"

"Sir when a unit's wound too tight, they start to fall apart. I'd recommend that you make Harry stand down the Phoenix Brigade for at least five days, and insist that Harry take some time off from everything. He needs some R and R, Headmaster," Jack replied.

"I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage Professor. R and R?" asked Dumbledore.

"Rest and Relaxation, Headmaster. Send him away from school, from the war for a couple days. His command team as well. If you don't let them blow off some steam and relax they're going to come apart at the seams. Harry's starting to see himself as the weapon you once treated him as, rather than a person," replied Jack.

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair, pinched of his nose and sighed heavily.

"If you don't mind me saying so Sir, you look like you can use some R and R yourself," said Jack.

Dumbledore gave Jack a wry smile before going to the floo and placing a few calls.

A few minutes later, McGonagall, both Snapes and Remus arrived.

"Now Professor Parsons, if you would be so kind as to repeat to them what you just told me?" asked Dumbledore.

Jack repeated his comments and expanded on them, detailing what stress Harry and his team were under and what was happening with Harry as he reacted to that stress. Then he explained how Harry needed some serious relaxation away from Hogwarts and the war, even if it were only for a few days. Sitting back, he waited for everyone to explode.

Serena paced the room, drawing everyone's attention away from Jack for a moment. "That explains the drop in his grades of late. I knew he wasn't sleeping well. Ginny and I had talked about some sort of relaxing potion like a stronger calming draught, but all of those things have addictive properties." She stopped and looked at Albus. "I think Professor Parsons is correct. A few days away would do Harry a world of good. I can offer a suggestion of where, if everyone else agrees that time off is needed."

Minerva McGonagall sipped at a cup of tea thoughtfully. "Normally, I would disagree with Professor Parsons' assessment. But we're not talking about a normal school schedule for Harry. Despite his lighter course load, he's doing more work than any other student. I know Poppy was most upset when he left the infirmary early when he was recovering from the Dementor attack. How many students are we be talking about here?"

"That's easy. We'd stand down the brigade, meaning we would cancel their training sessions for a few days, including the advanced defense class scheduled during the day. That will give most of them a break. Harry's command team are the one's I'm most worried about. The command team includes Harry, Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna, Blaise and Susan," Jack replied.

Dumbledore leaned forward looking at Jack intently. "I wasn't aware that Miss Bones was considered part of the command team. When did that happen?" he asked.

"Blaise has been training her to be his second in command in charge of security. He felt that getting someone other than an ex-Slytherin in that slot was important for everyone." He glanced at Severus. "Sorry

Professor, I'm not trying to offend your old house. The point is, ever since Harry and his people captured that Death Eater in Hogsmeade, she's been learning the position and has gotten pretty good at it."

Dumbledore nodded, and then squinted at Jack. "Professor, this wouldn't also have anything to do with the fact that Mr. Zabini is currently dating Miss Bones, would it?" he asked.

Jack chuckled. "Well, there's no sense trying to slip stuff past you, Headmaster. But yes, if we were going to send them off to relax, we'd accomplish more send them off as they're paired. I'll bet you ten bucks that sending Zabini off alone would only result in him stressing more, not less."

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows at that, then nodded. "Severus? We've yet to hear your opinion," Dumbledore said.

Severus hesitated for a moment. "Headmaster, I work closely with all of Harry's group. There have been some 'incidents' among them..."

"Incidents?" Dumbledore interrupted. "Has Miss Weasley..."

"No, not her Sir. In fact, were it not for her total focus on Harry at this point, I'd say she's the least affected of the group. There has been some friction though. They're all worried about school and what they have to do, and more than a bit frightened by it. More importantly, they're concerned about Harry, which is only fueling their own problems. Harry's barely getting four hours of sleep at night, and he's started skipping meals. On more than one occasion he's shown up at class clearly exhausted," Severus said.

Jack looked around at the faces of the people in the room, and then turned back to the Headmaster. "I think you have a consensus, Headmaster. The next question is, where to send them?" he asked.

"Well I know a place that's far away from the war and England," Serena said. "But how do we convince Harry to go? And none of these kids will have the necessary clothes they need."

"I'll pay whatever costs are incurred," offered Remus.

Jack laughed and said, "Don't ask Harry. Just tell him they are all needed for a conference and shanghai them."

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "Hmm, well that is a colorful way of putting it, but it would work. Serena, will you and Remus make the necessary arrangements?" he asked.

Both of them nodded at the Headmaster.

Somewhere in England, Location unknown...

Voldemort sat in his chamber looking at those surviving members of his inner circle. The number had dwindled considerably in the past month and a half.

"Summon Wormtail," he snapped abruptly.

A few moments later Wormtail ran into the room throwing himself prostrate before Lord Voldemort.

"You summoned me, Master?" asked Wormtail.

"Wormtail... you have pleased me of late, now I have... a new task for you that requires your special abilities. I want to know what is happening within the school. Your animagus form is well suited for finding that out," Voldemort said.

"I am yours to command, Master," whined Wormtail.

"I am pleased with you Wormtail, I must think of a suitable reward for when you come back," Voldemort said in a low tone, causing Wormtail to shiver.

"Unlike that one, he has... displeased me," Voldemort said pointing at another man. He lifted his wand in a gaunt hand. "Crucio," he said, causing the Death Eater to drop to the floor in agony.

Wormtail started to scurry from the room when Voldemort stopped him. "Oh, Wormtail, you have only a short time to complete this mission. Soon, very soon, we are putting our plans in motion. I expect to hear back from you soon," Voldemort said while casually torturing the Death Eater.

Wormtail bowed low and left the room.

A little bored, the Dark Lord lifted the curse and looked closely at his victim. The man was curled into a fetal position, blood dripping from his ears and nose.

"Perhaps a little time spent under the tender care of his brothers and sisters will teach him a valuable lesson," Voldemort said, address those in the room. As the group drew forward eagerly, he held up a warning hand. "Do not kill him. As useless as he is, he still has some value to me. If he can bring me the mudblood, I may yet forgive him."

As the man was pulled to his feet, he hissed in pain as his hair was yanked back, forcing his head up so he faced his Lord. When Voldemort smiled at him, Viktor Krum flinched back from the unholy pleasure blazing forth from those red, malevolent eyes.

The Great Hall, Dinner, Second week of February...

Harry sat at his usual table with Ginny and their friends; his head buried in an old book Jack Parsons had given him. He'd pushed his plate away from him, the meal barely touched. He scowled when Ginny pulled the book from his hands and pushed his plate back into place.

"Harry, you need to eat," she said. "The book can wait."

He opened his mouth on a sharp retort when Professor McGonagall interrupted him.

"Professor Potter, the Headmaster would like to see you, Miss Weasley, Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger, Mr. Longbottom, Miss Lovegood, Mr. Zabini and Miss Bones in his office. He suggests that you leave your books and such in your dorm rooms first. You eight are to attend an emergency meeting at the Ministry tonight."

Harry looked up at her, startled. He'd seen Jack Parsons with Hestia Jones earlier and no mention had been made of any meeting. Surprised, all he could do is nod at Professor McGonagall. With one last stern look, the Professor turned away.

Harry scowled. "An emergency meeting? I left Jack a little while ago and he didn't say anything about a meeting. Maybe I'd better run over to Dumbledore's office and see what this is all about," he said.

Harry started to stand when Ron hand snaked out and yanked him back into his seat. "Mate, it can wait. Finish your dinner first. You heard McGonagall, she said after dinner."

Harry looked at his friends, all of who were frowning back at him. "Why do I get the impression you all have something you want to say to me?" he asked slowly.

"We're worried about you, Harry. You're not eating well enough lately..." Started Hermione, but Ginny interrupted her. She grabbed Harry by his head so he was looking at her.

"Love, it's part of a family's job to look out for one another. And that's what we're doing. Now eat your dinner, please?" she said softly.

Harry stared into her soft brown eyes for a long moment before pulling his plate back in front of him. He took a bite, swallowed, and then tried to stammer an apology to them all. Ginny put her hand on his leg under the table while he ate under the watchful eyes of his friends.

After dinner, they trooped to Dumbledore's office. Filing into the room, Harry wasn't surprised to see Serena and Severus already there. He became wary once he noticed the grins on their faces, however.

Dumbledore stood and passed out a long rope, telling everyone to grab hold. Harry glanced around, noticing that the only person not holding the portkey was Dumbledore. As Albus raised his wand to activate their transportation, Harry spoke.

"Headmaster aren't you comi..."

With a wave of Dumbledore's wand, the portkey was activated.

Portkeying is usually quick, just a few seconds. But this particular trip was taking a very long time as far as Harry was concerned. After what he was convinced was more than a minute he started to panic. No portkey from Hogwarts to the Ministry should last this long! What had gone wrong?

A few seconds later, the portkey stopped and they were in the lobby of a strange building. Unfortunately for Harry, he went crashing into Ron, knocking them both down. His glasses flew off his face and skidded another ten feet.

Grumbling, he allowed himself to be helped to his feet while Hermione handed him his glasses. Putting them on, he looked around. This wasn't the Ministry! Then he spotted Jack Parsons and Hestia Jones walking towards them with several house elves in tow. Jack was wearing the strangest clothing.

Back at Hogwarts...

The word was passed from Professor McGonagall to several of the squad leaders of the Phoenix Brigade. Advanced Defense classes had been canceled for the next few days and there would be a five day rest from the evening meetings. It was explained that Harry and his command team were away.

Gradually an impromptu party started in the common room that night. Eventually, and not even knowing the reasons for it, the entire student body and some of the teachers joined in.

No one noticed the small creature moving in the shadows within the castle.

Welcome to the Bahamas...

Harry gaped at Jack and Hestia. Jack was wearing a Hawaiian shirt that literally exploded with color, a pair of cut off jeans and, to top off his ensemble, he wore the most ridiculous straw hat.

Jack stopped in front of Harry and his friends. "Ok folks, listen up. As you've probably noticed, this is not the Ministry and there is no emergency meeting," Jack began. Harry started scowling. "We are about to undertake a time honored tradition of R and R. Now normally that would include several bar fights and some hook..." He paused for a moment and thought better of completing that statement. "Rest and Relaxation

people," he said instead. "For the next four days you people are going to forget the war. You're going to forget about muggles, pure bloods and all of that horse hockey!"

Most of the group started smiling, the two exceptions being Harry and Hermione.

Hermione was frowning. Four days? No Books? She turned her attention back to Jack as he started speaking once again.

"These elves are going to take you to your bungalows. You'll find clothes already there for you, courtesy of Uncle Remus. Tomorrow, Serena here will teach you all two new charms, which you'll need to use while you're here. So, I want everyone to meet back here in the lobby in the morning for breakfast and a little lesson. Believe me, if you don't learn the sun block charm, you're going to regret it. Same goes for the bug repellent charm. Now, follow the elves and they will take you to your rooms," Jack concluded.

Harry followed the small creatures as they left the lobby of the building. He stopped suddenly, causing several people to run into him. Jack turned and looked at him curiously.

"Harry, what is it?" he asked.

"Is that the ocean?" Harry asked back, his voice filled with wonder. Ginny gripped his hand tightly. "I've never seen the ocean, except in pictures," he whispered.

Each couple was shown to a bungalow containing two bedrooms. Jack made the same speech to each couple about behaving themselves and doing what's right. And it might have worked as far as speeches go, except he spent an inordinate amount of time winking at the couples and rolling his eyes.

Harry didn't know whether to be annoyed or not. He had so much work to do back at Hogwarts and here he was on some tropic island. On the other hand, the ocean seemed to call to him. Ginny had gone into her bedroom to see what kind of clothing she had. Harry quickly changed into a pair of shorts and t-shirt and went outside.

Leaving the porch of the bungalow, he stepped onto the sand and walked down to the water's edge. The beach glowed softly in the moonlight and the waves gently lapped around his feet. The water was warm and inviting.

It would be so nice to sit here and just watch the ocean, he thought. NO! This is wrong! I should be back at school, working on the sword, or training. Not here.

Harry tensed and was seriously thinking about changing to Wings and flame traveling back to Hogwarts when a hand fell on his shoulder. He turned to look, seeing Jack standing next to him.

"Listen to the old man, kid. You need this time off. Your running on empty at this point and it shows. Not only in yourself, but your friends. If you won't relax for yourself then do it for them," he said evenly.

"First rule of command, take care of your people..." Harry murmured. Jack beamed at him. Harry sighed and nodded back.

Jack shook his shoulder. "Don't worry about it, Harry. When we're done, remind me to tell you about the time my buddies shanghaied me and I woke up the next day in bed with two hookers... ah never mind." Jack blushed as he spotted Hestia coming towards them.

Harry watched in amusement as Jack and Hestia walked away, leaving him with his thoughts. He moved a few feet up the beach and sat down, watching the ocean again. Out in the distance he could see the silhouette of an ocean liner all lit up. Ginny came up behind him and sat down so she could rub the tense muscles in his shoulders. He leaned back into her.

Harry jerked awake to see all of his friends sitting around him, talking softly. Ginny felt him tense and she tightened her grip around his neck. He relaxed back into her embrace and watched as his friends talked. The main topic was a simple one, what were they going to do for the next few days. Hermione seemed rather upset that she didn't have a single book to read. According to her, nothing beat sitting on the beach with a good book.

The group sat out talking until nearly midnight. Then, by an unspoken agreement, everyone went back to his or her respective bungalows. Ginny expected Harry to fall asleep quickly, so she was surprised when he turned to her in bed and started kissing her with a soft passion. Always before, their passion burned hot and fast. Tonight was something different. He made love to her slowly, bringing her to orgasm again and again before finally finding his own release.

Spent, he rolled to his side and pulled her back against him. He was asleep within moments. Ginny smiled, snuggled closer in his arms and followed him.

Harry awoke the next morning, the sun high in the sky. Dressing, he stepped out onto the porch and blinked in the blinding sunlight.

"I see you finally up, Harry. Ginny asked us not to wake you since you hadn't slept well in months. I daresay you look better because of it," Serena said, smiling at him as she stepped onto the porch.

Harry blushed, thinking about the fact that it wasn't until nearly three am before he fell asleep.

So my suspicions are correct, thought Serena with a wry smile. "With your permanent tan, I don't expect you'll need to use the sun block charm, but I want you to learn it anyway. And keep an eye on Ginny. With her fair skin she can easily become quite ill from too much exposure to the sun. The same can be said for Ron. For that reason, I'll teach you an extra charm that I also taught to Hermione for treating sunburns."

Later that evening after spending a day relaxing and swimming, Jack had, with the help of Hestia, built a large fire for everyone to sit around. Jack had cooked up barbequed burgers, which he called 'old fashioned American food'. He also served something that he called Texas Belly Burner Chili, which reminded Harry of some of the more distasteful potions he'd had in his life.

Harry was sitting next to Ginny, holding her hand, when he looked over at Neville and Luna. Luna wore her usual dreamy smile. Curiously, Neville was wore an expression that closely matched his girlfriends.

"Luna, Neville, I completely forgot. Have you guys worked any further on your animagus forms?" he asked over the crackling fire.

Conversation around the fire stopped. As everyone turned to the couple, awaiting their reply, Harry smiled. Apparently he wasn't the only one interested.

Luna smiled vaguely at Harry and changed into a blond colored Great Horned Owl. Harry's wasn't the only jaw around the fire to drop open as the owl circled the fire a few times. Landing beside Neville, she resumed her human form.

"That was bloody brilliant, Luna!" Ron exclaimed.

Harry frowned, then he ran his hand through his hair in frustration.

"Harry, what's wrong?" Ginny asked in concern.

"Her!" he said, pointing at Luna. "She needs a name. She's a blond horned owl, what are we going to call her? Horny? Can you imagine the Marauder roles then? Moony, Trips, Wings, Spots and oh by the way, meet Horny?"

As the group burst into laughter, Ron yelled at Neville, "Oy mate! Is she?"

Neville blushed and started to stammer, but Luna turned her smile towards Ron. "And why would you like to know, Ron?" she asked.

Hermione smacked Ron in the back of his head. "Yes Ron, why would you like to know?" she asked in a steely tone.

Luna looked over at Harry. "I don't mind being called Horny, Harry." When the laughter started again, Luna actually blushed slightly. "But I would think Hunter or Talon would be a better name. As for horny, well, I'll save that for my Nevi-bear," she said in a dreamy tone.

Ron started rolling in the sand, shrieking in laughter. "NEVI-BEAR!" he hooted in amusement.

"I think that will be enough out of you tonight, Ronniekins!" Hermione said archly.

Ron paled as Ginny started to snicker.

Harry turned towards Luna. "Hunter. That's good Luna. How about it Neville? Have you had any success?" he asked.

Neville shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Harry. I think I know my form, but I haven't been able to release it."

Harry looked over at Hermione and Ron, who both shook their heads at him. Harry thought about it for a moment. "Alright then, would you like me to help? I'd have to test your mental shields first though," he warned.

Neville and Ron looked eager but Hermione looked anxious. Severus and Serena looked very interested.

"Mione, what's wrong?" Harry asked softly. She was looking down and he could tell she was upset. He quickly stood up and went over to her, kneeling next to her in the sand.

"Mione? Tell me what's the matter?" he asked her, a hand on her shoulder.

"I-I-I can't seem to find my form, Harry. I'm sorry, but I didn't want to disappoint you," she said, refusing to look into his eyes.

"Mione, you're my sister and nothing you've done has ever disappointed me, nor do I believe you ever will disappoint me," he said, giving her a quick hug and a kiss on the head. "If you want to continue trying this, I'll speak to Professor McGonagall when we get home and see if she knows a way of helping you find your form. But you don't have to do this just because we've all done it."

Hermione searched his face carefully, looking for the reassurance he offered. Then she nodded at him and gave him a weak smile. Harry stood and glanced at Ron.

Ron never bothered to look at him as he moved closer to Hermione and wrapped his arms around her. Holding her close for a moment, he murmured something in her ear. Looking up at Harry, he said, "Mate, I'll wait 'til she's ready, if you don't mind. I'd like us to do this together."

Harry nodded approvingly.

"If Professor McGonagall can't help you Hermione, I may be able to," said Serena softly.

Severus blinked at her in surprise. "Serena?" he asked.

She smiled at him and transformed into an Osprey. When he gasped, she spread her wings and answered with a piercing cry.

"How come you never told me Serena?" asked Severus in surprise.

She transformed back and shrugged. "In the Americas, animagus don't need to register. And while I can make the change, I don't use it very often. Certainly not enough to bother registering. But I can help Hermione if Minerva can't."

Hermione smiled. "I'd like that, Professor."

Seeing that little problem resolved, Harry turned his attention back to Neville. "So Nev? Do you want me to help?"

Neville nodded eagerly, so Harry waved him over. Everyone else turned to watch.

"Alright Nev, the first thing I need to do is check your shields. Let me do that for a moment, then we'll see where we stand," Harry said.

Severus watched and shook his head as Harry checked Neville's shields. The young man didn't use a wand or any verbal incantation.

Harry leaned back after a moment and smiled. "You're fine there, Neville. Now I think we need to practice drawing on your magic. You have the power Nev, you just haven't learned to focus it yet. Do you remember the last spell we learned a few weeks back, 'et pulvis concido'?"

Neville's eyes grew wide. It was an extremely powerful and destructive explosive spell they had learned. He nodded at Harry with a look of worry in his eyes.

Harry chuckled and smiled back at him. "Don't worry Nev, you're not going to cast it tonight. I just want you to start feeling your magic, as if you were going to cast it. Close your eyes and let the magic build up within you. Feel it, feel the power gather and rise within you, Nev. When you feel like you can't take that feeling anymore, push it back down. Push it hard until you can't feel it anymore."

Neville sat there for a long minute his eyes closed. Luna moved over to sit next to him for support. Suddenly his eyes popped open, "Merlin! That was something, Harry! I could feel the magic raging in me and, without a spell, it had no place to go," he exclaimed.

"Alright Nev, now close your eyes and do it again. Do it until you can call the magic up quickly and push it down quickly," Harry told him.

A few quiet minutes later Neville opened his eyes and looked at his friend. "That's amazing, Harry. Is that like what you feel when you call on your magic?" he asked.

Harry shook his head. "I don't need to call it up like you do. It's always there. But that's a topic for another day. Now, I want you to picture your form. But this time, put it in a cage, because that's where it really is. You need to call up your magic and use it to break the form from the cage. Remember, if you succeed in releasing it, master the beast first and foremost!"

Neville gulped and nodded nervously, then closed his eyes. Everyone watched him breathlessly as the seconds ticked away. Beads of sweat started to appear on his forehead. Then his features rapidly shifted, as his body grew larger and furrier.

Everyone gasped as they stared at where Neville had been sitting. In his place was a large Grizzly Bear.

"Nevi-Bear!" shouted Luna as she lunged to hug him in his new form. Everyone gaped at Luna for a moment. It seemed the flighty girl had finally gone off the deep end. A minute later Neville had returned his regular form, panting from the effort.

Luna looked at everyone smugly. "I told you he's my Nevi-Bear!" she said happily.

Harry looked around at his friends, then whispered something to Ginny. She nodded eagerly in return. Harry looked at Luna who arched an eyebrow, then nodded at him. Then she whispered something to Neville, who grinned.

"Well folks, I think a few of us will go for a stroll. We'll be back shortly," he said to the stunned people. With that, he transformed into Wings, Ginny became Spots, Luna changed into Hunter and Neville into his bear form and they moved away from the fire, towards the tropical forest.

"MERLIN!" Severus let out in an explosive breath. "Did you see that? His method shaved years off of the animagus training!"

"Will they be safe in the forest?" asked a worried Hermione.

Ron laughed. "Mione, think about it. Harry's a phoenix, Ginny's a wildcat, and Neville's a bear! The question should be, will the forest be safe from them?" he asked, grinning.

Chapter 12 - Hermione's Revenge and Troubles

The Bahamas...

Harry awoke the next morning feeling refreshed and wonderfully alive. He, Ginny, Neville and Luna had spent several hours in their animagus forms, romping through the tropical forest. Personally he had to admit he was glad Ron hadn't come along. They had seen too many spiders last night and Ron would have gone bonkers.

Ginny lay next to him, one arm draped over his chest. He really liked what Remus had picked out for clothing, especially Ginny's nightwear. They were breathtaking. She had been reluctant to wear some of the items at first. But seeing Harry's reaction to them quickly changed her mind. Last night, she had climbed into bed wearing a translucent floor length gown that shimmered in the darkness and hugged every curve. They spent several hours just talking and occasionally kissing before finally falling asleep. Harry had to admit that he treasured those moments as much as when they made love.

It was their last full day on the island before returning to Hogwarts, and Harry had some plans for today. Jack told them they would be attending a luau later tonight, whatever that was. The last few days had been filled with swimming and relaxing on the beach.

He gently pulled away from Ginny and got out of the bed. Getting dressed, he went back over to her and pulled the light blanket up around her. He then conjured a white lily and placed it next to her before leaving the room.

Stepping out onto the porch, he looked around. Up the beach he could see an American Wizarding couple with their two kids. They had met them the first day of their arrival. He watched as the young boy ran into the water and skimmed the surface for few feet and wondered if he could do that.

Sprinting for the water's edge, he never noticed Ron and Hermione step out onto the porch of their bungalow. He hit the water's edge and suddenly realized he didn't know what to do next. His momentary confusion caused him to trip and fall headfirst into knee deep water. He slid to a painful stop after a few feet and slowly got up to the sounds of Ron rolling on the floor of the porch, laughing his head off.

"OY! Potter! You're supposed to do that on a board," Ron shouted gleefully.

Harry grinned evilly at Ron and levitated him off the porch and down the beach to the water.

"HEY MATE! NOOOO!"

Harry dragged him out deeper and started dunking him in the water. It was quite amusing to see Ron bouncing up into the air, then down into the water with no one laying a hand on him.

"Oh! I'm gonna kill you," Ron tried to shout between dunkings.

Ron dropped suddenly as a stream of cold water hit Harry in the back. He whipped his head around to see Hermione smiling sweetly at him and looking very innocent. Smiling back at her, he could sense Ron swimming in. He summoned and amplified the wave Ron was on, directing and channeling it. Ron and the wave arced high in the air. Hermione looked up at the oncoming wave and paled as it crashed down on her.

By the time Ginny came out of the bungalow, there was a full-scale water war going on between Neville, Luna, Ron, Hermione and Harry. No one was safe. Ginny let out a startled squeak when she saw four blasts of water heading at her from four different directions and apparated to the water's edge next to Harry.

Harry spotted her and, instead of resorting to magic, he picked her up in his arms and waded out to deeper water. Ginny was pounding him about the shoulders, trying to get him to stop.

Severus, Serena, Jack and Hestia were sitting together on the porch of the Snape's bungalow, enjoying morning tea and watching Harry and his friends.

"Now that's what they needed," said Serena, eyeing the water fight. "Harry's gotten more sleep these past few days than he has in weeks." She grinned as she watched Ron running down the beach, screaming. On his heels was a horde of illusionary, dog sized spiders.

The fight finally ended with everyone pinning Harry to the sand and Ginny tickling the bottom of his feet.

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...

Wormtail had spent the last several days slinking about the castle. On more than a few occasions, he had hidden to avoid being seen by one of the teachers. Once he even managed to hide from the prying eyes of Dumbledore.

He'd found no sign of Harry Potter, nor any evidence of any sort of training, other than regular schoolwork. Running about the corridors, he felt an odd sort of nostalgia and a longing for his own younger days. But those days were long gone and could never be recovered. It was on top the Astronomy tower that his anger flared again as he remembered her.

Audrey Kingston. She was in the same year as Peter and his friends. He remembered vividly how jealous he had been of James and Lily. One night, in despair, he had talked to Lily about Audrey. She had told him that if he had any feelings for Audrey he should tell her and get it out in the open. When he did just that, here on top of the Astronomy tower, she had rejected and laughed at him. Called him a sniveling disgusting excuse for a man.

A few days after Audrey's rejection, he approached Lucius Malfoy. Several weeks later, he had accepted the Mark. And Audrey? She vanished during a Hogsmeade weekend. But Peter knew the truth. She had followed him willingly after he cast the Imperius on her. She screamed for hours while he used her and sliced the skin from her body with his knives. Oh yes, that was a sweet memory!

Leaving the Astronomy tower, his anger grew to full-fledged rage. He didn't know where Harry was, but he'd have his revenge against the Potter family again and again. He ran all the way to the owlery in his rat form. Making sure the owlery was empty he transformed back to his human form and quickly scribbled out a note, using the parchment and quills that were always kept in the room. He pulled out a knife and wrapped the note around the hilt of the blade, and then he cast a sticking charm to keep the note in place. Selecting carefully, like a viper he struck.

Leaving the owlery, he turned back into his rat form and made his way quickly from the castle. Dawn was only a few hours away and it was time to leave. He had a report to make.

Grimmauld Place, Morning...

Tonks closed the door to Jason's room and smiled. He had completed his homework from yesterday and she'd just delivered his lessons for the day. Like so many young wizarding children, he was being home schooled.

When she had left Jason's room, he was playing with a floating orb, a Wizarding toy designed to help a small child begin to understand how to focus their magic. The colorful orb changed colors and shapes, based on the commands from the child. With Jason occupied, Tonks was finally able to go in search of her wayward husband.

Remus had gotten up very early to handle an emergency call from Hogwarts and hadn't come back. She was a little surprised to learn just how knowledgeable her husband was. It was quite likely that he was the brain of the Marauders, while James and Sirius were the foot soldiers.

After checking the Order's Map Room and the kitchen, she finally found him in the library. The room was a mess. Books lay scattered on the floor and stacked on chairs. Glancing about the room, she saw him at a table, bent over several open books, with copies of several of the Order's maps spread out before him.

"Don't let Hermione see what you've done to this place, Remy. She'll probably faint," Tonks said with a smirk.

His head whipped up and he glared at her. Muttering to himself, he turned back to his books. He snapped one volume closed and tossed it over his shoulder before reaching for another.

Tonks saw all the warning signs. Whatever the call had been about, he was angry...very angry. Walking over to him she laid a calming hand on his shoulder.

"Talk to me Remy. What's gone wrong now?"

He snapped the book closed in front of him and leaned back in the chair. She started to knead his shoulders, draining the tension and anger from him. After a few minutes he reached up and pulled her hand forward far enough to place a kiss on her palm. Then he sighed heavily.

"You have a fool for a husband, Tonks. I'm such an idiot!"

"What? You're not a fool or an idiot, Remus Lupin. Now tell me what the problem is," she retorted angrily.

"Hogwarts! All of these maps I created are nice, but I didn't take into account the wards around Hogwarts interfering with them! Albus floo'd this morning. He says Pettigrew has been in the castle and our maps didn't detect him," he said, smashing his fist on the table.

"You're not going to be able to solve anything while you're angry, Remy. Come and have a spot of breakfast and calm down. We'll work on this later, all right?"

She blinked for a moment, a bit shocked. Had she just channeled Molly Weasley? When he nodded and allowed her to lead him from the library, she sighed.

Breakfast, the Great Hall...

Harry and his friends assembled at their usual table. They were tired, suffering from portkey-lag, but glad to be back at Hogwarts. Last night Harry had told Ginny that the trip was one of the best times of his life, and he'd love to take her back there for their honeymoon. Ginny was very pleased with the idea and had made sure he knew it in no uncertain terms. He had blushed when she told him she would make sure to bring all of the 'special' nightgowns Remus had supplied.

Harry looked carefully at his friends. All of them seemed to be more relaxed this morning, despite their fatigue. Ron and Hermione were arguing softly about something, Neville and Luna were busy talking, and Susan was feeding Blaise a piece of sausage off her plate. Harry was amazed by the changes that had occurred in them all. Especially Blaise. The dour, serious ex-Slytherin was still dour and serious, but he now smiled every so often. He'd even tell jokes!

Harry leaned forward against the table. "Guys," he said softly, gaining their attention. "When I first started attending Hogwarts, several teachers told me how noticeable my parents love for each other was. I think that our kids are going to hear the same stories about us," he concluded with a smile.

Susan and Hermione blushed, Ginny squeezed his thigh under the table and Luna cocked her head and looked at Harry thoughtfully.

Turning back to his breakfast, Harry was about to start reviewing what he'd be doing in DADA class this morning when Professor McGonagall interrupted his reverie.

"Professor Potter, the Headmaster would like to see you, Mr. and Miss Weasley, and Miss Granger in his office as soon as possible," she said in a hard tone.

Harry looked at the other three, then shrugged before standing up. Professor McGonagall led them from the Great Hall.

Headmaster's office, Hogwarts...

Arriving at the Headmaster's office, they filed in, noting the grim expression on Dumbledore's face. Next to the Headmaster's desk was a small, open topped basket with a cloth over it. For once, there was no offer of a lemon drop.

Taking the seats Dumbledore offered them, Harry was surprised when he felt Professor McGonagall laid a hand on his shoulder. He was about to look up at her when Dumbledore spoke.

"I'm glad to see you all back. While you were away we had an...unwelcome visitor in the school. I'm afraid the visitor came and has since left, unobserved, but he wanted us to know he was here. He left a message behind," Dumbledore said heavily, passing a bloodstained parchment over to Harry.

Potter,

My master wants you to know that no place is safe for you or your friends. Not your hidden headquarters, not your home, not your school. We're coming for you.

Wormtail

Harry read the note, then passed it to Ginny. He looked up at Dumbledore and the Headmaster sighed.

"Harry, it pains me to tell you that we found the note attached to the hilt of a knife early this morning... in the owlery," he said.

Harry grabbed the arms of his chair tightly. "Hedwig? Where is she? Is she alright?" he asked alarmed.

Dumbledore's eyes darted to the covered basket. Harry spotted the glance and dropped to his knees, tearing the cover off the basket. His shoulders shook as he tried to control his emotions. With one hand he reached down to smooth the feathers of his friend and companion for these past seven years.

Ginny and Hermione both joined him. Ginny gasped and leaned against Harry and Hermione rubbed his back comfortingly. They both knew how much he loved his owl.

"I'm truly sorry, Harry. Hagrid and Madam Grubbly-Plank both tried their best, but the damage was too great. The bond between wizard and familiar is most potent. We all share in your pain," Dumbledore said softly, a tear running down his cheek. "If you wish, I'll take care of..."

"No! She was my friend. I'll take her down to the lake. She'd like it there," he replied, overriding the Headmaster.

Harry carefully placed the covering over the basket, picked it up and stood. Turning, he left the office, not looking back. Everyone exchanged a glance before following Harry.

In a secluded spot not far from Hagrid's hut, Harry set the basket down. Raising a hand, he silently cast a spell and a hole appeared in the ground. Kneeling next to it, he placed the basket into the hole and covered it over.

Bowing his head, he remained silent for several minutes. Finished with his thoughts, he looked up and his eyes burned. He held one hand over the small grave. A moment later, a slab of white marble appeared over it. The inscription was simple, yet poignant.

Faithful Hedwig

Never Forgotten

There was a flash of flame above the grave. Fawkes appeared, singing a soothing note as he circled the grave, weeping. Where the tears hit, small flowers appeared, tinged red and gold. Their fragrance was uplifting to all.

Hermione, who had been holding onto Ron's arm, whispered, "Phoenix Flowers, they only grow on ground blessed by phoenix tears. They bloom all year long. They're very rare."

Harry's head whipped around. He had thought he was alone, but he spotted Ginny, Hermione, Ron, Professor McGonagall and Dumbledore only a few feet away. Hagrid, who had brought his class down to the lake to talk about the giant squid, stood nearby with his class of first year students.

Ginny stepped over to him and knelt by his side. He looked at her, trying hard to fight back the tears.

"She was my first true friend, after Hagrid. And my first real birthday present...Hagrid gave her to me. There were times...at the Dursley's she was the only thing that kept me from killing myself. She'd land on my bed and cuddle with me. Sometimes, when the Dursleys were starving me, she'd bring me mice. She'd get mad when I wouldn't eat them," he choked out. Then he angrily dashed away his tears.

Ginny put her arm around his shoulders. Her touch, that small comforting gesture, broke his composure. He leaned into her, crying for his friend. Hagrid stood silently, tears streaming down his own face. He had heard everything Harry had said.

Hagrid's class seemed frozen in place. The first years seemed transfixed by the spectacle of their favorite Professor crying. Most of them had brought their familiars to school but had not yet developed a bond with them.

Dumbledore stepped forward and placed his hand on Harry's shoulder. Then he turned to the students. "The bond between wizard or witch and their familiar is a strong bond of friendship and even love. It is a

relationship that goes far deeper than owner and pet. And the loss of a familiar is felt as keenly as the loss of a family member. If you can achieve such a bond with your familiar as Professor Potter had, you will someday understand, and you will have achieved a great thing," he said softly.

The class nodded at the Headmaster while Harry stood, helping Ginny to her feet. Hagrid walked over to Harry and swept him up in a bone crushing hug, which unfortunately for Harry, nearly resulted in some real bones being crushed. After Hagrid put him down, both Eric and Erika, who were part of Hagrid's class, hugged him.

Harry wiped the tears from his cheeks and led the group from the grave surrounded by flowers.

Warbangers...

For the past six months Fred and George had been studying books given to them by Harry and Jack Parsons. The normally fun loving twins were looking into some of the devices muggles used to wage their wars.

The guidelines that Harry had laid down for them were simple. He wanted devices that would either incapacitate, or otherwise put a large group of people out of action quickly. Harry had further defined the term 'out of action' as to mean the inability to cast spells.

With that in mind, the twins dug into their jobs with gusto. Some of their inventions, like the Quagmire Traps and the Grapes of Wrath, showed great promise and could be used to defend the castle. Other items, like the Puking Gas, had proven to be a problem and would probably not be used. The gas was a great idea, but if the wind blew in the wrong direction, things could get messy.

Today Fred and George were meeting with Jack Parsons and Dumbledore to discuss plans for placing some of their more unique items about the castle before the battle.

Entering the Headmaster's office, Dumbledore waved the two young Weasley men to seats. Jack took up a position near the window, leaning against the wall.

"You know, this is..." began Fred.

"...the first time we've..." continued George.

"...been in here and not..." said Fred.

"...been in trouble!" finished George.

Jack shook his head and muttered something about 'geeks' under his breath. Both twins turned to look at him.

"Oh no sir! I can assure you..." began George

"...we're not geeks! we're..." continued Fred.

"...the wizard equivalent!..." said George.

"...WEEKS!" proclaimed the two, simultaneously.

Dumbledore coughed politely, trying to bring everyone's attention back to the topic. "Boys, I know from the sound of the explosions, and the screams coming from your building, that you've been busy. Would you mind telling us what you've managed to accomplish thus far?" asked Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling merrily.

The two young men looked at each other, then Fred nodded to George.

"Well Headmaster, in our talks with Harry, he made it pretty clear what he wanted," said George.

"With the Dark Forest abutting the southern and western sides of the castle, we've concentrated on creating enough Quagmire Traps to cover the northern and eastern sides. That should make approaching from those directions much more difficult," said Fred proudly.

"For the Dark Forest, we've decided we'll release the Grapes of Wrath and a lesser number of Greatgrapes," added George proudly.

"Greatgrapes?" Jack asked curiously.

"Oh, you know about our Grapes of Wrath, right?" asked Fred.

Jack and Dumbledore nodded.

"Well, Greatgrapes are larger versions of the Grapes of Wrath," answered George with a beaming smile.

Both Dumbledore and Jack shuddered at that thought.

"Don't worry Headmaster, they have a limited life span. Eight hours after we release them, they'll become inactive," reassured Fred.

"We've also turned out nearly ten thousand grenades," added George.

"I still say they need a better name. We should have called them Boom Bangers or something," muttered Fred, glaring at George.

George glared back. "Don't blame me! That's what Harry calls them," he retorted.

"That will teach us to never let Ginny pick a man with no imagination," Fred said to George.

"Gentleman, let's get back on track please?" asked Dumbledore painfully. Jack didn't know whether to laugh or strangle them.

Both of the twins turned back to Dumbledore, looking upset.

"Well you see Headmaster, it's about Hermione's wand virus hex," said George, looking ashamed. "We've tried everything we can think of and we just can't limit its effects. It's just too dangerous to use when so few people are capable of casting wandlessly," he concluded sadly.

Ah, so here's the crux of the problem. They are upset, thinking they have failed, thought Dumbledore. He nodded thoughtfully at them. "I suspected that might be the case gentlemen, but you needn't fret about it. You have done work far in excess of the grades you managed to obtain here in school. Why in fact, if I didn't know better, I'd say you deliberately failed your tests," he said with a slight smile and a twinkle in his eyes.

Both men managed to look very embarrassed.

"When can you start installing the Quagmire Traps?" Jack asked intently. "How much time will you need?"

"Oh, that! We can start emplacing them April first. It should only take two days," replied George.

"Yes, they're quite simple to lay down. We can activate the charm from the Warbangers building or anywhere else, once the fight begins," added Fred.

Jack smiled grimly. "Good. I'll get together with Ron and Hestia to adjust our schedules properly," he said.

"We'll come with you!" cried Fred.

"We haven't tormented Ronnienkins..." continued George.

"...since he proposed to Hermione!" finished Fred.

With a wave to Dumbledore, the two Weasleys leapt to their feet and followed Jack from the Headmaster's office.

Midnight encounter...

Wan Change left the infirmary well after curfew. She had been helping Madam Pomfrey with a first year that had been injured in a broom accident. She had stayed late because the boy had been scared. He was muggleborn and unused to Wizarding world medicine.

Madam Pomfrey was actually very pleased with the progress Wan had made, although her gruff demeanor with the young girl hadn't mellowed very much. Wan didn't care, she was helping and, in a small way, paying back some of the debt she felt she owed.

That debt lay heavy on her shoulders as she trudged back to the common room. She knew there would be few friendly faces to greet her there, but she'd hold her head high anyway. Let them think what they want, she thought fiercely. I'll do what I have to do to prove myself.

Suddenly she was grabbed around her neck and a hand clamped over her mouth, preventing her from screaming. A voice she didn't recognize growled in her ear.

"If you're not with us, then you're against us, Chang. Filthy mudblood lover!"

A dark clad figure stepped in front of her. Her eyes bulged outwards when she saw the wand pointing at her midriff.

"Interficio torqueo," the voice hissed.

She was surprised when nothing seemed to happen. A punch was delivered to her stomach and, as the air was forced from her lungs by the blow, she was released. When she slipped to her knees, she felt a pair of hands encircle her neck from behind. She tried to fight against the hands but she lacked the strength. Spots exploded in front of her eyes and then the hands released her as her assailants fled the scene.

She started to rise when the curse's effects hit her, doubling her over. With a whimper, she toppled over and lay on her side, curled into a fetal position against the pain burning through her.

The Common Room...

Harry sat studying at a quiet table. It had taken him a few days to get back into the rhythm of school and studying after Hedwig. It still bothered him, but his friends were always close at hand to help. He was about to close his book and pull out his sketchpad when a hand touched him on his shoulder. Looking up, he saw Blaise.

"Harry, we need to talk," Blaise said softly.

Harry nodded and put his book on the table. Standing, he walked to a nearby couch and spoke to Blaise. A few moments later, he turned to his friends.

"Guys, I'm going to the infirmary with Blaise. I'll be back when I can," he said. Everyone looked up at him, concerned.

"I'll go with you," Ginny stated firmly. Harry thought about it, then nodded in acceptance. He knew he had about as much chance of ordering her to stay behind as he had in ordering the sun to stop rising.

As they walked to the infirmary, Blaise filled them in on all the details. "One of our security patrols found Wan Chang lying in a corridor. She'd been attacked and whomever did it was pretty determined to do some damage. She's been cursed, probably by one of the Gut Burning hexes, and someone tried to choke her. Madam Pomfrey managed to lift the hex, but she can't do much about the damage," he said tensely.

Entering the infirmary, Harry and Ginny stopped short, seeing Madam Pomfrey and Dumbledore sitting beside the girl. Her face was ashen, her breathing slow and shallow. Harry walked over to her bed.

Madam Pomfrey looked up as they approached, her expression turned suddenly hopeful.

"How is she?" Harry asked softly, dreading the answer he knew he was going to get.

Dumbledore didn't turn to look at him. "She's slipping away. The curse did too much damage for us to repair. It won't be much longer. I will sit with her until the end. She should not be alone when the time comes," he replied heavily.

Ginny sat on the bed next to Dumbledore, placing a hand on his shoulder. "No sir, we'll sit with her as well," she said quietly. Dumbledore nodded gratefully.

Madam Pomfrey stepped over to Harry and grabbed his arm, the plea evident in her expression. Harry closed his eyes trying to block the look she was searing into his soul.

She can't be asking this of me, he raged silently. Wan! After what she did? How can I interfere? Has she truly turned from the dark? Doesn't anyone know the price I'll pay if I do this? But Madam Pomfrey wouldn't ask if she didn't believe in her. OH MERLIN! What do I do?

Harry could feel the internal phoenix song surging within him, clouding out all doubts and calming him. When he made his decision, there was a sudden burst of welcoming heat from his locket. An instant later, he took wing. Madam Pomfrey staggered back from where she had been holding Harry's arm and looked up in wonder at the black phoenix flying around the infirmary. For the first time in over an hour, she felt a sense of hope.

Wings circled the room several times, gaining speed with each pass. He screamed each time he passed over Wan and the stunned Dumbledore. Blaise, thinking something was wrong, left his position outside the infirmary and entered. He stopped dead in his tracks as Wings screamed again and dove at Wan Chang, talons outstretched.

Wings struck, tearing a massive wound in Wan's stomach. Launching him self into the air again, the black phoenix circled the bed once before coming to land next to the pale, dying girl.

Madam Pomfrey gasped at the obviously mortal wound Wings had created and rushed to heal it. Dumbledore leapt to his feet and grabbed her. She struggled in the Headmaster's arms, unable to understand what was happening.

Wan's eyes snapped open and she gasped as her lifeblood literally spilled from her body. Her vision clouded over and she never saw the phoenix by her side.

Wings cocked his head to the side and looked at the ashen girl before him. Then he bowed his head over her wound and wept.

Flame erupted in the air over their heads as Fawkes and more than a dozen other phoenix's appeared in the infirmary. The swan sized birds landed on beds, chairs, wherever they could, and sang a mournful song that wrenched at the hearts of everyone present.

Wings wept for Wan Chang, his tears flowing freely into her wound, sealing it, preserving it, and correcting the flaws. He wept for all that had turned from the light.

Moments passed and Wan's vision cleared. The paleness of her complexion receded and her wound closed. She gazed down at her stomach, then at the large bird beside her. She reached up and stroked the downy feathers.

Wings looked up as the other phoenixes changed their song to one of glorious exaltation. He sprang aloft and glided to the center of the aisle between the beds in the infirmary before reverting to his normal form. The song of the other phoenixes soared to a higher volume, echoing, amplifying and filling the whole of Hogwarts.

Harry pitched to his knees as his magic surged within him. His body burst into an intense corona of light.

To heal an enemy is an act of ultimate love, Fledgling. You are worthy of being a phoenix friend.

The words echoed in Harry's mind and he looked up in surprise at the phoenixes. This was the first time he had ever heard a phoenix in his mind while in human form. He nodded to Fawkes and the others. The song stopped as, one by one, the large birds vanished in a flash of flame.

Harry concentrated for a moment and dampened down his magic until he no longer glowed. Standing, he turned to face a grinning Dumbledore, while Madam Pomfrey rushed to check Wan. Ginny walked over to Harry and he put his arm around her shoulders.

"I think that James and Lily are most proud of you today my boy, as am I," said Dumbledore.

Ginny hugged him tightly. "How do you feel?" she asked.

He looked down at her and smiled. "I'm fine. I feel calm, refreshed and a little strange. I could hear Fawkes talk to me without being in my phoenix form," he replied quietly to her.

Madam Pomfrey straightened up and gave a sigh of relief before turning to Dumbledore. "She's sleeping, Albus. All signs of the curses damage are gone," she said, shooting Harry a grateful smile.

Dumbledore glanced at Wan. "Then I will leave her in your capable hands, Poppy. Harry, I'll escort you and your friends back to the common room. I think that Miss Chang may want to speak with you," he said.

Returning to the common room, Harry noted it was fairly crowded. Ron and Hermione looked up from where they were sitting. Ron gave Harry a curious look.

Harry shrugged, saying, "Wan Chang was attacked tonight, but she's going to be fine. Madam Pomfrey will probably release her in time for breakfast or lunch tomorrow."

Harry had spoken loudly and was unsurprised to note that the noise level in the common room had dropped to nothing. Everyone had heard, just like he had wanted.

Hogwarts Infirmary, the next morning...

Wan Chang blinked a few times, stretched, and then froze. This wasn't her bed! She bolted upright in fear, looking around wildly. She only relaxed when she saw Madam Pomfrey coming towards her.

"Awake are we, Miss Chang? I must say you look far better this morning than you did last night," said Madam Pomfrey in her typical gruff bedside manner.

"What am I doing here?" asked Wan.

"You were attacked last night, Wan. You would have died had it not been for the action taken by Professor Potter," replied the matron.

"P-P-Potter healed me?" she stammered in reply.

Madam Pomfrey nodded. "You might want to think about that, Wan. I'm not so sure your former friends would have been so generous," she replied in a gentle tone. "Be that as it may, I've checked you over and you're ready to return to class. I've laid some clothes out for you."

"Thank you, Madam Pomfrey."

Watching and Waiting...

Since the incident with Wan, Harry seemed to be much calmer. He was sleeping better and his nightmares, though frequent, had changed, becoming fuzzy, indistinct and lacking in emotional detail. It was something Harry was grateful for.

At the end of February, Wan supplied Blaise with a list of names. There wasn't anything anyone could do about the people on the list until they were caught in the act. Harry had put a watch on them, but he knew nothing could be done until they attacked another student.

Jack spent several hours a week teaching Harry the basics of sword handling. While swords were no longer considered to be a weapon of war, Jack had gotten interested in them as part of his martial arts studies. Like Harry's earlier training in martial arts, no one believed Harry and Voldemort would end up in a sword duel. But since Harry knew the sword was going to play an integral role in the final battle, Jack wanted him to be able to handle the sword without slicing his own foot off.

Harry had, by this time, drawn hundreds of sketches for the addition to the sword. Time was the critical element. The addition included a Spirit Crystal and meant the sword could not be prepared too far in advance.

Viki comes to town...

Viktor Krum limped into the Hogshead. Most of his bruises had faded but he was still recovering. He checked into a private room, telling Aberforth he'd be there the coming week and prepaying in advance.

Aberforth, being somewhat harried by customers, and reputedly somewhat crazy, never bothered to notice the softly blinking light of his dark detector. Later that day, the crystal was destroyed when he accidentally dropped a case of butterbeer on it, shattering the stone.

Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts...

Dumbledore was surprised. There was a knock on his door and for once his wards had not warned him that someone was approaching.

"Come in," he said, in reply to the knock.

When Harry Potter entered the office, Dumbledore's surprise increased. He had kept a tracking charm on the young man, as well as a few other students, all year long. Yet wards and charms had failed to detect Harry's approach.

"Sir," Harry said in greeting while taking a seat. "I'm concerned. This has been a far from normal school year for many of us. Study and class time has been interrupted by other duties. With the final battle coming, teachers and students are going to be injured, maybe killed. It would be foolish to think that we won't suffer losses. But what will happen after? We may have students who are unable to take their tests due to injuries."

"Yes. I confess I am worried about that myself. I have spoken with the Board of Governors and the Ministry concerning this issue. Right now, they are considering one of two paths. Either making everyone repeat their year, or extending the school year by another month to account for time lost. I think extending the year will be adequate, but the Board must consider all the options," replied Dumbledore.

"Yes sir, but what about any injured students?" Harry asked.

Both of them winced. They knew that at last year's battle in Hogsmeade they had gotten off extremely lucky. Among the students, only six had been injured, and only one seriously. This time would be far worse and they both knew it.

Dumbledore sighed, his eyes losing their twinkle. "I fear you are correct to worry about that, Harry. But both the Ministry and the Board have been warned that there may be the need to provide special tutoring for students convalescing from injuries. The Ministry has assured me that any students needing the extra time will have special NEWTS and OWLS set up for them on a case by case basis. I have also spoken to the teachers. All have agreed to help provide any tutoring required."

Harry nodded, then decided to bring up the other topic that had been bothering him for a long time. "Albus," he began, ignoring the Headmaster's startled expression. "There is still one injustice which you need to correct. One that has gone unchecked for far too long."

Dumbledore didn't miss the steeling tone of Harry's voice and thought frantically. An injustice? Against who? Surely he's not talking about Wan Chang.

"An injustice Harry? Against whom?" Dumbledore asked.

"Headmaster, we both know who opened the Chamber of Secrets all those years ago."

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes I do, Harry. But I fail to see your point."

"Hagrid, Headmaster! You need to have the edict of expulsion revoked and get him a wand. Everyone who knows Hagrid knows he's got what's left of his wand in that silly umbrella of his. And he'll need tutoring to bring him up to par with a seventh year."

Dumbledore blinked in surprise. This was something he hadn't expected. "Very well Harry, but you get to tell him," he said, a slow smile creeping through his beard.

Harry winced. He truly liked Hagrid, but the half giant was very emotional at times. "Actually Albus, I think it would be better coming from you. He idolizes you," Harry shot back with a grin.

The two wizards stared at each other for a moment before they both burst out laughing. As much as both of them liked Hagrid, they knew who ever told him was bound to be on the receiving end of a long painful hug and buckets of tears. In the end, they agreed to wait until all the paperwork was completed and then they'd tell him together.

Ideas and Plans...

"Ginny? Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Ginny looked up from the book she'd been reading to find Hermione standing beside her bed. Seeing the devilish look in the older witch's eyes, she put her book down.

"Sure, Hermione. What's up?" she asked.

Hermione sat down on the bed and pulled the drapes for privacy. She then drew her wand and cast a silencing charm around them.

"I need your help. I want paybacks for Fred and George's little stunt."

Ginny grinned. "Well, you have to admit, it was amusing."

"For you, maybe. But you're not the one everyone's snickering at. And I would remind you that I helped when Harry had problems proposing to you last summer!" Hermione said with a scowl.

"True" the younger girl said, frowning at the memory. "So, what did you have in mind?"

"That's what I'm having problems with. Every idea I've come up with so far leads to maiming and missing limbs. I want to prank them, not hurt them. Well, that's not true. A little pain wouldn't be so bad."

Ginny opened her book bag and removed parchment, ink and quill. "All right, let's work on some ideas," she said.

Sweet Revenge...

Midmorning found the Weasley twins in the potions lab of the Warbangers building. Cauldrons of all shapes and sizes gurgled and bubbled around them as they went over their notes for a delayed explosion time for their grenade potion. While they found blowing up their iron pipe cannons quite amusing, it wasn't really the effect they were going for.

An explosive sound rocked the lab, interrupting their argument over how much Erumpent horn fluid should be used. When the smoke cleared, both twins rushed around the room, checking the brewing cauldrons for damage. Finding none, they checked the rest of the lab.

"Nothing," Fred said, puzzled.

George shrugged. "Odd. There's no reason that should have happened. The Erumpent fluid is locked up in the office, so it couldn't have been that."

"All of the explosives are locked up," Fred said as he returned to the table and their notes. "We learned that lesson after blowing up Dad's work shed the summer of our fifth year."

"Don't remind me." George cringed as he joined his brother at the table. "Mum was shirty for weeks afterwards."

"Not as shirty as she was when you tried that shaving charm on the cat last Christmas," Fred said, laughing.

"I was nearly finished. It's not my fault the cat moved. Besides, Mum's eyebrows grew back, didn't they?" George asked, haughtily.

"I still don't see why she got angry at me," Fred grumbled, reaching for his quill. "For once, I was innocent."

George snorted and went back to reading his notes. When Fred dropped his quill, he barely noticed. When he dropped it a second time, he frowned and glanced at his brother.

"What is it?" he asked Fred, noting the shocked expression on his face. "What's wrong?"

"Look," Fred exclaimed, holding his hands up.

"Lovely hands, Fred. I have a pair just like them."

"Look at my thumbs."

"What?" George said, frowning at his twin's digits.

"They're backwards, you git!" Fred shouted. "I tried to pick up a quill to write more notes and I couldn't hold it!"

George grabbed one of Fred's hands and compared it to his own. They looked identical, of course. "I think you're going off the deep end, brother mine. You're thumbs look the same as mine."

"Really? Then pick up a quill and write something."

Muttering about the dangers of potions fumes on an unstable mind, George picked up a quill...and promptly dropped it. Frowning, he picked it up again and, once more, it slipped out of his hand.

Raising his hands, he stared at them in dawning horror. "What did you do?" he whispered.

"Me?" yelped Fred. "I've been in here with you all day. When would I have had time to do anything?"

"Wait," George said, looking into his twin's eyes. "That explosion, the smoke? What ya wanna bet ol' Remus is up to tricks again, eh?"

"Remus, of course! Come on then, let's go floo him."

After a frustrating few minutes of trying to manhandle floo powder into the fire without the use of their thumbs, Remus' head appeared. With much laughter, he informed them that he was not responsible for their current condition and neither were the rest of the Marauders, as far as he knew.

When Dobby delivered lunch an hour later, he found two depressed, but hungry young wizards. Leaving two trays, he disappeared with a small pop. Removing the lid from his try, Fred groaned.

"Of all days to have soup for lunch!" George exclaimed, eying his own tray with a scowl.

Having fished his dropped spoon out of his soup for the third time, Fred growled, "Mum's not here to yell and I'm hungry." Carefully picking up the bowl, he brought it to his mouth and drank hungrily, ignoring the warm liquid dribbling out of the corners of his mouth and down his shirt.

With a shrug, George followed his example and carefully picked up his own bowl.

Hogwarts Great Hall, Lunch...

"That should be one down," Hermione whispered to Ginny.

"They're in for a bad day," Ginny commented quietly, grinning down at her plate.

"What are you two whispering about?" Ron asked, suspiciously.

"Nothing," they replied in unison, their faces shining with innocence.

"You two scare me when you say that. You really do. Just tell me know. Am I in trouble?" Ron asked nervously

"Should you be?" Hermione asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh no, I'm not answering that!" Ron exclaimed and resolutely turned back to his lunch.

Harry looked deeply into Ginny's eyes for a moment, before his own widened and he snickered.

"Stop looking!" she sent him privately.

"Then stop looking so guilty, he sent back with a grin.

"Don't tell, she pleaded.

"Won't," he assured her, taking her hand under the table and giving it a squeeze.

For Love of Snape...

The twins locked up their lab and headed for their private quarters. Their thumbs had returned to normal an hour after lunch and they were able to return to their work. For a prank, it was mild and they felt lucky to have been let off so easily. That didn't mean the person behind it was safe, however. They had every intention of finding out who did it, and making his or her life a little more interesting for a few days.

They exited the Warbangers building and walked to the castle.

"Umm, Fred? I thought we were returning to our quarters?" George asked as they entered Hogwarts.

"So did I," Fred said, bewildered.

"I guess it doesn't matter. We can have dinner here and plot revenge after."

"All right. Let's find Harry and the others. We can let them know how our research is going while we're here."

Entering the Great Hall, they spotted Harry and headed in his direction. The table was crowded with couples, but there were two seats left. Luna, Neville, Ron, Hermione, Harry, Ginny, Serena and Severus all looked up as they approached.

Before the twins could reach them however, there was another explosive sound and the two young men were wrapped in smoke. Several startled screams echoed about the hall and all eyes turned in their direction. When the smoke cleared, silence descended.

The twins looked around, baffled. When the giggles, snickers and flat out laughter reached them, they turned towards each other and gaped.

Rather than plain black wizarding robes, each now stood wearing tights, ruffs, high-heeled slippers and codpieces.

"The codpieces were a nice touch," Ginny whispered with a straight face.

"I thought it might work," Hermione said, grinning.

The high-heeled slippers caused a few moments of anxiety as they wobbled their way dangerously to Harry's side.

"Did you do this?" George asked, glaring down into glowing green eyes.

"Wasn't me," Harry gasped out through his laughter.

"Oy! Didn't know you went in for codpieces," Ron said, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes.

"Shut it, Ronnikins!" both twins bellowed.

"Where's Colin and his camera when you need him?" Neville asked, weak with laughter and leaning against Luna.

"Behind them," Luna said, chuckling.

Both twins whirled around, stumbling in their high-heels. Grabbing at each other for balance, they looked up just in time for Colin to catch several shots of them before he sped away.

"Come back here," Fred yelled.

"I don't know why you're upset. Your new attire suits you rather well," a snide voice said from the table.

The twins turned once again, this time more carefully, and were confronted with the sneering countenance of Severus Snape.

"Here it comes," Hermione whispered to Ginny.

George wobbled around the table and dropped to his knees before the startled Defense Professor. Pulling his wand, he conjured a rose and held it out to Snape.

A flower was offered to me:
Such a flower as May never bore.
But I said "I've a Pretty Rose-tree",
And I passed the sweet flower o'er.

Then I went to my Pretty Rose-tree:
To tend him by day and by night.
But my Rose turn'd away with jealousy:
And his thorns were my only delight." George quoted, sadly.
"What are you doing?" Snape hissed in anger as those in the hall broke into gales of laughter.

"Oh I don't know, Severus. It was rather pretty, actually," Serena said, trying hard not to laugh.

"This isn't funny, wife!" he snapped back.

Not to be outdone, Fred pushed George away and dropped to his knees, smiling at Severus. He conjured a box of chocolates, gave them to the angry man glaring down at him, and then threw his arms wide.

I sleep with thee and wake with thee
And yet thou art not there;
I fill my arms with thoughts of thee
And press the common air.
Thy eyes are gazing upon mine
When thou art out of sight;
My lips are always touching thine

"At morning, noon, and night," Fred said, passionately.

When Severus moved to stand, Serena grabbed his wrist. "Do you really want them following you around the halls?" she asked, trying to stifle her giggles.

As he turned to glare at her, both twins stood and scrambled to stand on the tabletop. Gazing down on their once-feared Professor in adoration, they ignored the laughter and catcalls around them.

"Where did you find those poems?" Ginny asked Hermione, holding her aching sides.

"A book, where else?" Hermione said, smiling smugly.

"Why Snape?" Ginny chuckled quietly. "Why not Dumbledore?"

"Well, I figured it was a good way to kill three birds with one stone. Snape was a bastard for the first five years I was here and always picked on me as a know-it-all. Why not pay him back as well? Besides, Dumbledore would have enjoyed it. Look at him."

Ginny glanced over at Dumbledore's table and saw that he was slumped down in his chair, laughing as hard as everyone else in the hall.

Harry looked up at the two men now standing on the table. Cocking his head to one side in consideration, he squinted at them. Murmuring to himself quietly for a moment, he then sat back with a grin.

"Here comes the last poem," Hermione told Ginny in a low voice.

As everyone in the hall watched, the twins opened their mouths and...stopped. Hermione frowned in puzzlement. The next poem should have started. But rather than passionate verse, the twins only stared blankly at Severus.

Then, slowly, their costumes began to melt away to be replaced by pink tutu's, white tights, silk slippers and pink, pointy hats. When the small, gossamer wings appeared upon their backs, each twin lifted his star tipped wand and took flight.

As the crowd gaped at this new vision, sweet humming could be heard from the twins as they fluttered delicately about the hall. When they passed over Dumbledore, they swished their wands and fountains sprang up from each table in the room.

Harry slid to the floor and ducked under the table just as the fountains erupted and sprayed lemon drops down upon the crowd. Ginny shrieked and dove under the table. The others quickly joined her. Students and teachers were taking cover all over the hall. Dumbledore, limp with laughter, was being dragged to safety under a nearby table by a group of third years.

Hermione remained in her seat. Ginny dashed out from under the table to grab her, only to be arrested by the sight before her. The older witch sat holding handfuls of her hair and pounding her head against the tabletop.

"Hermione?" Ginny tried to call over the deafening roar of the lemon drops.

When Hermione didn't answer, Ginny grabbed the young woman and dragged her down. Ignoring the laughter of the others, she picked the yellow candies out of Hermione's hair, and then turned to her tablemates. The only person not laughing was Harry. With narrowed eyes, she watched as he looked out at the hall, smiling smugly.

"Harry, did you do this? she sent him.

"Who me? he asked in wide eyed innocence.

"Oh Merlin, you did! Why?

"I can't let you two have all the fun," he sent with a smirk. Then, closing his eyes, she saw his lips move, but was unable to hear him over the sound of the candies being ejected from the fountains and bouncing onto the floor.

The silence was absolute, and sudden. Ginny peeked out from under the table just in time to see the twins' costumes replaced by their normal attire. When their wings disappeared, they dropped like stones to the floor of the Great Hall. They looked around, dazed for a moment, before standing up.

"Umm, Harry?" Ginny sent him as she climbed out from under the table.

"What?" he asked as he regained his feet and glanced about.

"Are these the Headmaster's lemon drops, or did you conjure your own?"

He looked at her with an expression of dawning horror. "Oh, bloody hell!" he exclaimed aloud.

Ginny broke down in a fit of giggles.

"Ron, language," Hermione said, climbing out from the table.

"Hey! That wasn't me, it was Harry," Ron said indignantly as he helped her to her feet.

"Sorry, habit," she said, brushing off her robes.

The twins looked around in puzzlement. Spouting love poetry to Snape was embarrassing, but the prank was a good one. However, they didn't understand the point of the lemon drops. They watched students and teachers stumbling around the hall, slipping on the candy and shrugged to each other. Since no one else was going to do it...

Each drew his wand and, together, they shouted "Evanesco!"

The excited babbling of people stopped once more as the lemon drops in the hall doubled, then doubled again. The twins gapped at each other.

"Amateurs," Severus muttered, drawing his own wand.

Serena, hearing his comment, dove out from under the table with a shouted, "No!"

It was too late. Once again, the number of lemon drops increased. Severus stared at his wand as if it had suddenly turned into a turnip.

"Severus, don't! I'll explain later, but you can't banish them," Serena said, grabbing his arm.

"No one cast anything!" someone yelled. Everyone spun around towards the sound of the voice to see Harry Potter standing on top of a table. "You can't banish the candy. It will only cause their numbers to increase."

Several people jumped when loud popping noises were heard throughout the hall as house elves appeared. Many sent dark looks in Harry's direction, causing the emerald-eyed man to smile sheepishly.

Dumbledore watched gloomily as the candies were boxed up and removed. Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione joined him a few minutes later as Dobby approached and gave Dumbledore a piece of parchment. Everyone moved a bit closer to read.

Headmaster's Lemon Drops

Old total: 4 Million

New total: 32 Million

Harry groaned, Ron and Ginny laughed. Hermione moaned and fell to her knees.

"Oh, bugger me," Dumbledore said in despair.

Ginny's laughter increased when, from behind them, McGonagall's strident voice rang out. "Albus, language!"

Girls Dorm, later that night...

"It has to be here somewhere, Ginny!" Hermione exclaimed, going over her notes once again. She was sure the answer to what went wrong with her prank had to be there.

They sat on Hermione's bed, curtains drawn and silencing charm in place. The older witch was trying frantically to find out what had gone awry. No one had been harmed, other than the Headmaster of course. But she was worried. If something as straightforward as this could go so wrong, it cast doubts on many of the spells she'd helped create for the Brigade.

"Ginny, help me!" she hissed.

"I'm sure it's nothing," Ginny said, trying not to laugh. "Sometimes these things happen."

"How can you be so calm about this?" Hermione asked, scanning her notes.

"Because it's not that big a deal. Sure, the Headmaster has a few more lemon drops to give away," Ginny said, grinning outright, "but it's not the end of the world. You haven't found any mistakes in your notes and I doubt you will. Sometimes outside forces affect the spells we cast, you know that."

As the words sunk in, Hermione froze. Raising her eyes, she stared at the redhead for a moment. "It was Harry," she growled.

Ginny frowned as if in thought. "No, I don't think so. Besides, why would he use the Headmaster's lemon drops, rather than conjuring his own?" she asked logically.

When Hermione looked back at her notes, Ginny slipped from the bed and said goodnight. Reaching her own bed, she pulled the drapes for privacy and cast a silencing charm around it. Lying back on the pillow, she grinned and finally let go of the laughter she'd been holding in for the last half hour.

Bushy Haired Wizards...

George climbed out of bed the next morning and stretched. There was a lot of work to be done today, not least of which was finding out who had pranked them!

"Oy, Fred! Get up," he said, glancing over at his sleeping twin. When the lump in the bed across from him started to move, he grabbed his clothes and changed.

Tying his shoes, he looked over as Fred sat up. His jaw dropped as he stared at his twin. Finally finding his voice, he shouted, "What the bloody hell did you do?"

Fred's head whipped up at the shout and he felt his own jaw drop. "Me? George, what's wrong with your hair? And what's with the teeth?"

"Teeth? You're the one whose teeth have grown!"

The two gawked at each other before they both rushed to the bathroom, getting stuck in the door for a moment as they tried to enter at the same time. Gazing into the mirror, they stared, dumbfounded.

Red, straight hair had been replaced by bushy, uncontrollable brown hair. As one, they pulled their lips back and grimaced at their now overly large front teeth.

Turning to face each other, they both gasped, "Hermione?"

Great Hall, Lunch...

"The third prank should be over," Ginny told Hermione as she sat beside her at lunch. "The final prank should start any time."

"If Harry doesn't mess it up," Hermione muttered darkly.

"Hermione," Ginny started.

"I know it was him, Ginny. I also know you're not going to tell me."

Ginny shrugged and turned back to the table to fill her plate.

Itchy and Scratchy...

When lunch was over, George stacked their plates on the tray the house elves had left and Fred to the bathroom. Setting the tray on a small table near the door, George went back to his notes. He picked up his quill and jotted down a few comments. Dipping the tip in ink, he had just touched the quill to the parchment before him when a loud yelp from Fred caused his hand to jerk. With a curse, he stared down at the black line he'd just drawn through his notes.

When another loud yelp emanated from the loo, he stood and threw down his quill. "Fred, would you stop? I'm trying to work out here!" he bellowed.

Shouts, curses and slaps were his only answer. Concerned, he drew his wand and walked to the bathroom door. "Fred?" he called.

Receiving no answer, he reached out and turned the knob. When the door swung open, he found Fred standing with his pants around his ankles, slapping himself frantically. George looked around the room quickly, but saw nothing to explain his twin's actions.

"Fred, what are you doing?" he asked.

"Get them off!" Fred panted.

"Get what off?"

"Can't you see them? Get them off, they're biting me!"

"Fred, there's nothing there."

Jerking his pants up, Fred shoved George aside and charged out of the bathroom. Once he crossed the threshold, the biting stopped.

"Fred?" his brother questioned.

"I don't know. I went to use the loo and as soon as I sat down, a swarm of mosquitoes appeared and started biting me. They're gone now," he said, staring at the bathroom.

"There's nothing in here."

"Oh really? Then what's this?" Fred asked, as he held out his arm, now covered in bites.

"It's ugly, that's what it is," George said, walking over to look at his brother's arm.

The next half hour was spent trying to detect any curses, charms or other spells that may have been cast on the bathroom. Finding nothing, they went back to work.

Unfortunately for George, his turn came not long after. When he hobbled from the bathroom with his pants around his knees, Fred cackled in merriment.

"But there's nothing there, brother mine!" he shouted. "Oh, and pull up your pants. I really don't need to see that."

Glaring, George belted his pants around his waste and turned to stare at the bathroom once more.

"Maybe we should use the bathroom in our private quarters," Fred commented.

"Good idea," his twin said, and then reached out and pulled the bathroom door shut.

Over the next several hours, the twins found that no bathroom was safe from the blood-sucking hoard. Covered in itchy bites, they scratched furiously at themselves and contemplated their situation. They had given up casting healing charms on each other, as that only increased the itch. Things were becoming desperate and, short of reverting to nappies, they needed help.

"Hermione's going to pay for this," Fred muttered as he sprinted for the castle, George at his side.

Hogwarts Infirmary...

"This is the last of the blood replenishing potions, Poppy," Serena said as she unpacked the last box. "I'll brew more tomorrow after class."

"Thank you, Serena," the medi-witch said, closing the potion cabinet and sighing. "We need more calming draughts as well."

"I can start those tonight. Is anything else needed?"

"No, I think that's it," Poppy started when the doors to the infirmary burst open.

Whirling, the two women frowned as the Weasley twins stumbled in.

"Oh Merlin, what have they blown up now?" Poppy muttered, moving quickly towards the twins.

"The castle didn't shake and they're still in one piece, so it couldn't have been that bad," Serena said cheerfully, following her.

"Madam Pomfrey," George gasped.

"We need your help," Fred exclaimed, digging at this arm.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Mosquito bites," they both burst out.

"We're covered in them," Fred said.

Moving the young men to the nearest bed, Poppy and Serena listened as the twins explained what had happened. When they finished, they glared at the two women standing before them. Madam Pomfrey's lips twitched with amusement and Serena Snape grinned widely.

"It's not funny," George muttered. "I've got bites in places no bug should ever be!"

Poppy snorted in amusement and hustled off to the cabinet she's so recently left. Returning, she opened the jar she'd retrieved and, with Serena's help, spread the anti-itch cream over the twins. Finished, both women straightened.

"Strip," the medi-witch commanded. When both twins only gaped at her, she sighed. "We need to do your legs as well," she said patiently.

"And anywhere else you may have been bitten," Serena said, her amusement evident.

"We can do that," Fred said, grabbing the jar from Madam Pomfrey.

"Really," George assured the women anxiously.

"Are you sure?" Poppy asked, her eyes dancing.

"Yes!" both twins nearly shouted.

Stepping back, the medi-witch pulled the curtain around the bed. Turning, she met the other woman's eyes and they both grinned devilishly.

Behind the curtain, both men had stripped and were applying the cream quickly. Neither trusted the women not to offer their help again.

"You realize Hermione has to pay for this," Fred said.

"I don't know. She was only paying us back for what we did to her and Ron."

"True, but that was only one thing. She went overboard with her revenge."

"No, not really. Remember, we did broadcast it to the whole school," George reminded him. "Besides, do you really want her doing something like this to us again?"

"Good point," Fred muttered, pulling up his pants.

When the twins finally stepped out from behind the curtain, they found the women waiting for them.

"Thank you, Madam Pomfrey," George said, holding out the jar of cream.

"Keep it," Poppy said. "You'll need to apply it again, come morning. Besides, you may very well have more bites by then."

"It has to stop sooner or later. No prank goes on forever," George said.

With a frown, Serena stopped forward with her wand drawn. "Finite Incantatem," she said.

Both twins gaped at her stupidly.

"Bloody hell," Fred muttered.

"Never thought of that," George said sheepishly.

"But does it work?" Fred asked his brother.

"Only one way to find out," George said with a shrug and headed for the bathroom.

A few minutes later, the bathroom door burst open and George jumped out, arms spread wide. "No nappies for this redheaded lad!" he shouted happily.

With a loud whoop, Fred shoved his brother aside, entered the bathroom and slammed the door closed. Poppy rolled her eyes and Serena burst into merry laughter.

Viktor Krum...

Krum waited in one corner of The Three Broomsticks, his face hidden by his hooded cloak. Slowly, the students from Hogwarts came in, taking seats and conversing among themselves.

All he had to do was wait for his target to come in.

Hermione...

Hermione and Ron sat enjoying a butterbeer in The Three Broomsticks. It was the last Hogsmeade weekend they would be enjoying for a while, and the early March weather was almost spring-like for a change.

Hermione sighed a little. She knew Ron enjoyed the more down to earth places like The Three Broomsticks and that would be something she'd need to accept. She had been pleased when, on their last trip to Hogsmeade, he had taken her to Madam Puddifoots. Ron apparently thought that 'romantic' occasions were special treats.

Hermione didn't mind all that much. He was improving considerably. He was making a concerted attempt to swallow his food before he said something. She knew she really couldn't change him, but she could help him change himself for the better. And she had to admit to herself that, sitting here in The Three Broomsticks where friends constantly stopped by to chat, was fun.

"Would you care for another Butterbeer 'Mione? I'm thinking of getting one for myself and maybe a platter of chips we could share?" Ron asked her over the din of the crowd. She nodded and smiled at him. With the place so crowded today, a nod was as good as a shout.

Ron got up to make his way to the counter and place his order.

Hermione smiled and waved to several people around her table when suddenly a euphoric feeling washed over her. Her eyes widened as she recognized the spell and her mind raged as she got up and headed towards the exit.

Viktor Krum...

There! She was alone now and he had a clear shot. In a flash his wand was out, the spell was cast and the commands given. Since he was next to an exit he stepped out of the building and waited for her to show up.

Ron...

Ron turned from the counter and gaped in surprise to see that other people were now filling the table he and Hermione had been sharing. He looked towards the exit in time to see someone who looked like Hermione turning the corner and vanishing from sight.

Curious and more than a little alarmed, Ron pushed his way through the crowd towards the exit. Unfortunately, the crowd thickened as more people entered, which only made his actions more frantic. Something was wrong!

Finally making it to the exit, he yanked the door open. He stepped out of the building and ran around the corner, following the girl that looked like Hermione. Rounding the corner and heading to the back of the building, he skidded to a halt. There was a flash of light and he spun around as something hit him hard. Then the world tilted sideways and he fell to the ground. Looking up he saw Hermione, her wand out, pointed at him and a man standing beside her.

"Mione?" he croaked. He gave his ring a twist, and then tried to reach for her before his arm fell limply to the ground and darkness claimed him.

Hermione...

Hermione was aghast! She knew she was under an Imperious curse, but she couldn't break out of it. Ron, her Ron, was on the ground, cut down by her cutting hex. She fought for control to no avail. Dumbly, she watched as Viktor Krum smiled evilly at her and took her wand from her hand. Tears started streaming down her face.

"Now Herm-own-ninny, you must not weep, he vas a mudblood lover. He vill die, now or later. My master vill be most pleased vit me," he sneered at her. "But first ve have fun, ja?"

Krum ripped open the front of her blouse and pawed at her breasts, squeezing one painfully. She couldn't even close her eyes to block the sight. She fought an internal battle with herself. Part of her, the part controlled by the Imperious, was blissfully happy about what Krum was doing. The rest of her struggled to break free, to scream, to do something!

She blinked for a moment and started to raise a hand towards him. He backed up enough to hit her with another Imperious curse. Then he backhanded her, hitting her cruelly across her cheek. He punched her in the stomach as hard as he could, enjoying the fact that, under the curse, she had no choice but to stand and take the beating.

The Phoenix Brigade...

Members of the Brigade surged out of The Three Broomsticks. The scene was repeated from every building in Hogsmeade. Several students boiled out of Hogwarts, running for the gates to apparate to town.

"Search the town!" Blaise shouted from his position in front of The Three Broomsticks.

In Madam Puddifoots, Harry felt the command pulse from the ring and stood up, knocking his chair over. Ginny was already heading for the door. Harry transformed into Wings and vanished.

Reappearing high above Hogsmeade, he looked over the town carefully. Spotting the trouble he screamed. Then, folded his wings, he dropped into a steep dive, his talons outstretched.

Blaise, hearing Wings' scream, looked up in time to see him dive behind The Three Broomsticks.

"Everyone follow me!" he shouted and sprinted around the building with twenty brigade members on his heels.

Rounding the corner, he saw a man struggling to get an aim on the phoenix that was attacking him. Blaise waited until he had a clear shot and he took the man down with a Reducto to the center of his back. The man fell without making a sound.

Wings swooped down over Ron, hooking his talons into his shirt, and lifted him bodily into the air. With a flash of flame, he vanished again.

Hermione...

Freed of the curse, she collapsed back against the rear wall of The Three Broomsticks, weeping. She was so distraught that she never noticed her nakedness. Blaise dropped to his knees next to her and peeled his jacket off to wrap around her.

Susan knelt next to him and pulled Hermione into an embrace. In another moment, Ginny arrived from Madam Puddifoots.

"Hermione! Where's Ron?" she cried after spotting the large puddle of blood.

Blaise turned to her. "Harry took him. He's probably taking him to Madam Pomfrey right now."

Ginny's eyes widened. She stared at Hermione for a moment, then she apparated to the gates of Hogwarts.

Hogwarts Infirmary...

Madam Pomfrey was enjoying a nice cup of tea when she was startled out of her seat by the sound of a screaming phoenix. She rushed from her office in time to see Wings lower Ron Weasley to one of the beds before landing on the motionless young man. He dropped a few tears into the wound before springing aloft again and vanishing in another burst of flame.

Rushing over to Ron, she quickly ran a few scans before running to the floo.

"Serena, I need your assistance in the infirmary right now," Madam Pomfrey yelled into the Snapes private quarters.

Madam Pomfrey turned, ran to a cabinet and started pulling out potions. The floo flared and Serena stepped out. Her eyes widened at the sight of Ron Weasley lying on a bed, deathly pale.

"Serena, this isn't a tour stop! Get the syringes from the other cabinet and start filling them with blood replenishing potions," Poppy snapped.

She then stepped to Ron and murmured, "Suspensor Vitalus." Her wand glowed blue and the light extended to encompass Ron. "Give him four units, two to each arm, Serena. Harry healed the wound, but he's lost a lot of blood," she said tensely.

The doors banged open as the two women worked on Ron. Ginny stood in the doorway, her chest heaving as she breathed raggedly.

Grimmauld Place...

Wings appeared in the Map room of the Order of the Phoenix. Several people gasped as Wings transformed.

Harry quickly started thumbing through the assorted maps. He was looking for several specific things.

No one approached him. He was surrounded by a nimbus of light and his eyes glowed like search lights. The magic rolled off him in waves and the building shuddered as each wave pulsed through it.

Remus ran into the room and skidded to a stop when he saw Harry.

Finding what he wanted, he stuffed the maps into his pocket and looked up. When Remus looked into the younger man's eyes, his breath caught at the rage and pain he saw in those emerald eyes.

Without saying a word, Harry apparated from Grimmauld Place with a loud crack.

"Shit!" Remus exclaimed with an explosive breath. Whirling, he ran for the floo.

Harry and Hermione...

Blaise gasped as a glowing Harry appeared behind The Three Broomsticks. He frowned when he saw that Hermione had not yet been moved. Before anyone could say anything, he snapped to Blaise. "Leave the body, I'll be back for that. I want to... send a message," he said in a voice as cold as a freshly dug grave.

"Hermione" he said as gently as he could, "we need to get you up to the school."

When the girl didn't say anything, he knelt next to her. "Mione, we need to get you to Madam Pomfrey," he repeated. Her eyes remained fixed on the puddle of blood. Gathering her gently into his arms, he apparated to the edge of Hogwarts wards with another loud crack.

He carried her at a trot all the way to the infirmary. As he did, his anger fed his determination and his magic swelled. The double apparition should have exhausted him, but the moment he passed the gates of the castle, he could feel the energy pouring back into him.

He pushed the doors of the infirmary open. Trotting past Ginny, he laid Hermione down in the bed next to Ron. Madam Pomfrey paled when she saw Harry bringing in another patient. Wan Chang, who had arrived while Harry was gone, rushed over to help with Hermione.

Harry stepped back from the bed and turned to leave. Ginny placed a hand on his arm.

"Where are you going?" she asked in a quavering voice.

He gave her a smile that never reached his eyes. "To send a message," he said in a frigid tone.

Dumbledore was just entering the infirmary when Harry changed into Wings and vanished from sight.

The Three Broomsticks...

Wings reappeared in the back of The Three Broomsticks and transformed. Harry then pulled a map from his pocket and scanned it briefly. With a grim expression, he nodded to Blaise and apparated away.

Muggle London...

The Death Eater was hiding in the shadows, waiting for his contact to arrive. He froze as he heard a cold voice from behind him.

"Looking for someone?"

He started to turn when the voice said, "Petrificus Totalus."

A hand reached out from the shadows and grabbed him by the collar. With a loud crack, they vanished.

The Three Broomsticks...

Blaise jumped again as Harry reappeared, this time with a man he didn't know. Clearly the other man was under some sort of spell. Harry held him with one hand and his eyes darted about wildly. He was trying to speak, but couldn't.

Harry lifted the man bodily and threw him so he covered the dead Viktor Krum. With an outstretched hand he muttered, "Corporis singularis" under his breath. The live Death Eater's eyes bulged outward in pain as his back fused to the back of the dead Viktor Krum. Harry kept the spell on him for a moment longer, and then stopped it.

Reaching down, he grabbed the man again by his shirt collar. When he apparated away with his double burden, it sounded like a crack of thunder.

Riddle Manor, Little Hangleton...

Harry looked at Riddle Manor. The drab dreary building was, according to the Order, currently holding forty Death Eaters. The building was supposed to be heavily warded. He was about to put that theory to the test.

Now to get Tom's attention, Harry thought. He raised one glowing hand towards the building and said, "Et pulvis concido".

Harry's hand flashed a violent purple and a beam extended out from it towards the building. It hit the wards but didn't stop. When it hit the side of the building, it seemed as if the building were contracting in upon itself. Harry could hear shouts of alarm from within, but it was too late. In a stupendous roar, the building exploded in a purple fury of flame.

Harry blinked at the bright light and smiled as the smoke cleared away, leaving a thirty-foot deep crater. Voldemort's ancestral home was no more. The Death Eaters inside were but a memory.

He leaned down over the moaning Death Eater. The terrified man flinched back from the fire burning in Harry's eyes.

"Go back to your half blood master and tell him that if he wants to play, he's going to have to do better than sending assassins after my friends," Harry sneered. "Go back to Tom and tell him that Harry Potter laughs at his feeble-minded efforts. I invite him to climb out of whatever sewer he's currently cowering in and come at me directly, if he has the guts. Do you understand me?"

The frightened man nodded jerkily. Harry's glow was clearly visible, even in the bright sunlight and he was terrified by the power he had just seen.

Satisfied, Harry stood up and transformed back into Wings. In a flash of fire he was gone from Little Hangleton.

Hogwarts Infirmary...

Wings reappeared in the infirmary. When he noticed the small crowd gathered there, including some that were not part of his group or of the Order, he glided out of the infirmary and into the nearest classroom. There, he transformed back to his human form. He concentrated for a moment and his magic snapped back to normal levels, eliminating the glow. Once that was complete, he walked back to the infirmary.

Slipping in through the doors, he noted a number of strangers and several Order members, including Kingsley Shacklebolt. Dumbledore was nowhere to be seen, but Remus and Mrs. Weasley were present.

When Harry arrived, Ginny let go of her mother and sprinted over to him. He wrapped both arms around her, while she sobbed softly in his shoulder.

Kingsley turned to Harry. He was in a bind. By law, he was bound to investigate and bring in all guilty parties involved. As an Order member, he was intimately aware of Harry's activities.

"Mr. Potter, I'm afraid I must ask you to surrender your wand for testing," he said.

Harry handed his wand over with a smile. He hadn't used his wand since class, two days ago, and that had been to help a third year clean her robes after the class had ended.

Shacklebolt handed the wand to another man who ran the test. Frowning, the man ran it again, and then once more. Finally, he handed the wand back to Shacklebolt, who arched an eyebrow in question at him.

"Scourgify, Director. This wand hasn't been used in two days," replied man.

Shacklebolt turned back to Harry. "Tell me, Mr. Potter, have you ever been to a town called Little Hangleton?"

"I was there three years ago, Director. If you recall, I was kidnapped and used in a ritual which gave Voldemort his body back," Harry replied evenly. A number of the Aurors present flinched when Harry mentioned the name.

"And were you in that area today, Mr. Potter?"

"That is enough, Director!" said an icy voice.

Shacklebolt whirled to face the Minister of Magic, Amelia Bones, with the Hogwarts Headmaster at her side. "Director, under Ministry Emergency Directive 812a, I am ordering you to halt this investigation," Bones said firmly.

Shacklebolt's eyes widened. The Minister had just cited a new emergency directive concerning military and security operations. Shacklebolt shot the Minister a grateful look and nodded. This was one operation his counter parts in MI5 would call wet and black, very black.

His Aurors looked at him in surprise and he motioned for them to leave. He knew that, back at the Ministry, he would have to carefully explain ED812a to his people. He handed Harry's wand back and gave him an apologetic look, before following his Aurors out the door.

Dumbledore stepped forward, looking at Madam Pomfrey. "Poppy, how are your patients?"

Madam Pomfrey looked up from checking Hermione over. "Ronald will be fine, Headmaster. He arrived severely wounded and nearly dead, but Harry gave him some phoenix tears, which healed most of the major damage.

"My greatest concern right now is for Miss Granger. While her injuries are far less serious than Mr. Weasley, her mental state upon arrival was bordering on catatonia. She was put under at least two Imperious curses, forced to wound her fiancé and has been molested sexually. I've given her a dreamless sleep potion for now so she should be asleep for at least eight to ten hours.

"I've no doubt that Mr. Weasley will be released in time for dinner tomorrow. But, with your permission, I think I would like to keep him here in the hopes that he can help ease her through this crisis," she concluded.

Mrs. Weasley moved over to stand next to Harry. She wrapped an arm around him, and then reached for Ginny. She held them both in a tight hug for a few moments before releasing them.

Dumbledore nodded in acceptance of Poppy's wishes. Molly said she intended to remain with them through the night.

"Harry, might I ask you and Miss Weasley to come to my office? We have something that needs to be discussed. Amelia and Remus will be joining us," Dumbledore said.

Harry nodded, knowing full well he was about to be yelled at. Resigned himself to that fact, he followed Dumbledore out of the infirmary.

Arriving at the Headmaster's office, Harry took a seat facing the desk and waited for the yelling to start.

"Harry," began Dumbledore. "You cannot simply run around blowing up buildings," he said firmly.

He was about to continue when Harry held up a hand. "Headmaster, with all due respect, it was a valid enemy target. There were no innocents anywhere in the area. Besides, I wanted to send Tom a message, one which would both enrage him and redirect his efforts."

Dumbledore leaned forward in his seat. "A message, Harry? What kind of message?"

"I left Hangleton with one Death Eater still alive to deliver my message to Voldemort. I told him that if he wanted to continue to play feeble games, I'd be more than happy to oblige him. I called him a few names...feebleminded, half blood...I called his hideout a sewer, that sort of thing"

As Harry spoke, everyone in the room turned pale. "Harry, you realize that by taunting him, he will focus all of his efforts on you?" asked Amelia intently.

Harry looked at her with a grim smile that did not reach his eyes. "Yes Minister, I'm aware of what it will do. But in the past few weeks he's set out to systematically attack people directly involved in my life. My brother, the woman I love like a sister, my familiar. I am even aware," he said, turning back to the Dumbledore, "that you, Headmaster, have been withholding information from me concerning the death of Dudley Dursley and his aunt Marge."

"Harry," Amelia said softly. "I can understand what you're trying to do. But I want to make a request of you. The next time you decide to level a building, please do not go alone. Last month we enacted Emergency Directive 812a, which allows all members of the Ministry Militia, including you and your brigade, to operate outside of what is considered normal legal boundaries. But we cannot afford to lose you at this time."

"Alright Minister, I'll agree to that. I'll admit that what happened was a spur of the moment thing and I don't expect to repeat it. But I wasn't about to allow any more attacks on my family go unpunished. If it'll help, I'll give you my wizard's oath that I won't repeat this," said Harry in an even tone.

Amelia smiled in relief. She actually thought for a moment that Harry was about to embark on a vendetta. "I don't think your oath is necessary, Harry. Your word has been sufficient in the past, and still is in my book."

Amelia nodded to Dumbledore and then used his floo to return to the Ministry. After she left, Harry reached into a pocket and, removing the two maps he'd borrowed, gave them back to Remus. He did have the grace to look sheepish about it.

Remus tucked the maps into a pocket and started to laugh. "Somehow Harry, I think Sirius is probably howling in laughter right about now. Only you would blow up Voldemort's ancestral home and insult him at the same time," he said, shaking his head.

Dumbledore coughed politely to gain their attention. "Harry, one thing puzzles me. You know about what happened to the Dursley boy and his aunt, but it doesn't bother you that I've withheld information? And just how did you manage to find that out?"

Harry chuckled, saying, "Headmaster, I am not angry because it's the only piece of information you've held back from me. And to answer your second question, I'll give you a hint. You messed up and created a case of dual allegiance. If you haven't figured it out in a couple days, I'll tell you. But it will cost you a detention of... oh, say a week, eating at one of the first year tables," he replied with a wide grin.

Dumbledore laughed. "Very well, Professor. I'll take you up on your offer, but if you lose, you pay the same detention. In the meantime, I suspect your fiancée has some words she wants to say to you. I suggest finding a nice, sound proof place to hold that conversation in."

Harry glanced over at Ginny. She stared at him, her eyes flashing with anger and he winced. Her features softened at his wince. "Oh, come on Harry. I'm only going to yell at you a little bit," she said, grabbing his hand and pulling him from the room.

Hogwarts Infirmary, just after midnight...

Molly Weasley was dozing on one of the spare beds. Ron had awoken a few hours ago and she'd explained what had happened to him and Hermione. She managed to get a light dinner into him before he drifted off to sleep again.

Hermione opened her eyes and looked around, then she remembered. She bolted upright and screamed.

"RON!"

Ron leapt out of his bed and sat on hers, grabbing her. She looked shocked to see him alive.

"Ron?" she asked quietly, her lower lip trembling.

"Shhh... 'Mione, I'm fine. Harry used his phoenix to heal most of the damage and Madam Pomfrey took care of the rest," he whispered back.

She buried her head into his shoulder and sobbed. "I thought I k-k-killed you," she cried.

He tugged on her chin until she was looking at him. "Nope, I'm still here 'Mione, and you're still going to be a Weasley. We all know you weren't in control when you cast that spell," he said, before kissing her gently.

Molly got up and walked over to the couple. "Hermione dear, you're still tired. Why don't you lay back down. Ron and I will keep you company love, he's not going anywhere," she said.

Ron got out of the bed and helped Hermione lay back down. He then straightened out her blankets and tucked them tightly around her before lying down next to her.

"Oh Ron, I'm not going to yell at you if you climb under the covers with her," Molly said with some asperity. "She needs you to hold her tonight and neither of you has the energy to do any more than that!"

Ron sheepishly climbed under the blankets with Hermione. She snuggled in close to him as he wrapped an arm around her protectively. Within moments, both were asleep again. Molly smiled at the pair and leaned down to straighten out the blankets again before returning to her own bed for the night.

Chapter 13 - Hagrid, Revenge and Betrayal

Somewhere in England, Location Unknown...

Dietmar Eberstark cowered before Voldemort. As head of the Bulgarian Death Eaters, he had been responsible for Viktor Krum and his failed plan to attack Hermione Granger.

"FOOL! OAF! IMBECILE!" roared Voldemort, enraged. "Not only did you fail me, but your plan resulted in the destruction of my ancestral home!"

"M-M-My lord! O-O-Our plan would have worked! It was..."

"ENOUGH! I TIRE OF YOUR EXCUSES AND YOUR EXISTANCE," yelled Voldemort. He was seething. While he really held no great affection for his ancestral home, there was a certain matter of principle involved.

"Summon Wormtail," he snapped to a nearby Death Eater, who ran from the room in response to the command.

A few minutes later Wormtail rushed into the room, kneeling next to the quivering Eberstark. "I am yours to command, Master," he said, bowing his head.

"Wormtail, this... thing," Voldemort pushed against Eberstark with his foot, "has displeased me for the last time. What do you know about it? I wish for him to suffer greatly."

"He has two sons my lord...," stammered Wormtail.

Voldemort's red eyes glowed malevolently. "Excellent, Wormtail. I think we can do something with this."

A State of Unease ...

Things settled into an uneasy state in the school after the last Hogsmeade visit, in which Hermione and Ron were attacked. Most of the students had no clue that their incoming and outgoing owl mail was being intercepted and checked by the staff. Harry and Jack Parsons had impressed the need on Dumbledore to take such drastic action to reduce the chance of anyone outside of the school finding out what was going on.

The Phoenix Brigade assembled every evening after dinner in the Room of Requirement. Once there, they used portkeys to travel to a Ministry constructed mockup of Hogwarts in the extreme of Northern Scotland to run through drills, sometimes solo, but often with Ministry Defense Forces. The only real glitch in the works

was that, while the Goblins were still insisting they would send a Goblin Brigade to assist in the defense of the castle, they were reluctant to join in any 'joint training' exercises.

The Weasley twins had managed to perfect their cannon and were deep into development of various types of munitions for it. Crusher nets and Expanding Cluster Shots were two of the more promising munitions they had developed. With the perfection of the cannon, several were already being installed and Phoenix Brigade Grenadier Squads were being trained in their use.

Harry had reluctantly decided that he needed to drop his remaining classes. As he explained to Dumbledore, he could repeat them next year if necessary. Dumbledore tried to talk him out of it, but even he had to admit that between meeting with the Ministry, overseeing the brigade and his own personal training, things were getting too intense. Serena Snape was quite upset when she learned of his decision. Fortunately for Harry, Dumbledore backed his decision and the Potion Mistress, though not happy about the situation, held her tongue.

Durmstrang Institute, Somewhere in Northern Europe...

Nestled in the Scandinavian mountain range, Durmstrang was a small school compared to Hogwarts, or the American Institute of Magic in Salem. With mountains on three sides, the small castle was safe behind its anti-muggle wards. Being in one of the remotest areas of a national park helped keep the school hidden from prying eyes as well.

Durmstrang had long been known for being the only European school that openly taught the Dark Arts. The new Headmaster of Durmstrang had not changed that policy when the old Headmaster, Igor Karkaroff, vanished from sight several years earlier. Durmstrang was most noted for supplying training for many of the known Death Eaters. Unfortunately for Durmstrang, most of them had been, in Lord Voldemort's opinion, inadequately trained.

Unlike Hogwarts, or even Beauxbatons, Durmstrang was notorious for maintaining its location secret. Former students and staff took a blood oath to keep its exact location private. Regrettably for the students and staff, blood oaths can be broken.

The operation began around midnight. More than four hundred Death Eaters, Wormtail, and Voldemort himself, surrounded the castle. After disarming the staff, students were rounded up and brought to the central auditorium, where they were also disarmed. The castle's occupants were then herded into the dining hall, where a small stage had been conjured.

Many gasps were heard throughout the hall as Voldemort took the stage, followed closely by two Death Eaters dragging a limp body between them.

Voldemort looked out upon the crowd and smiled. "Wormtail, find me Eberstark's brats," he hissed.

Wormtail bowed low and backed off to issue orders. Soon, dozens of Death Eaters were searching among the student body, looking for two boys. Within five minutes a tall blond haired boy, perhaps seventeen years old, was dragged forward. His eyes burned with hatred as he saw his father's crumpled form. He glared at Voldemort and revenge burned in his heart.

Seeing the boy's expression, Voldemort laughed. Oh yes, this was entertaining!

Several minutes later, the second lad was found. He was much younger than his brother and visibly frightened. The small boy started to cry when he saw his father's form on the floor.

Wormtail nodded to several men and they proceeded to turn Eberstark over on his back. He was lifted and placed against a wall, held there by a sticking charm, unable to move.

"Eberstark," snarled Voldemort. "This is the price of failure."

Eight Death Eaters stepped onto the stage and took aim at his sons.

"My lord, I beg of you," sobbed the man brokenly.

"CRUCIO," the eight Death Eaters shouted in unison.

Both boys collapsed to the floor under the onslaught, screaming in pain. The student body stood mesmerized by the scene unfolding before them. They were completely oblivious to the fact that other Death Eaters were walking among the staff, systematically killing them.

"Watch your children, Eberstark. Watch them driven to insanity! This is the price of your failure," sneered the Dark Lord.

"Wormtail," snapped Voldemort. "When the brats are done, kill the rest of the students. We will then destroy the castle. In the meantime, Mr. Eberstark and I are going to have some fun."

The Great Hall...

Dumbledore joined Harry and his friends at his table for breakfast. Harry had already finished his meal and was keeping an eye on Hermione. Since the attack, she had shown an uncharacteristic lack of confidence and her eyes held a haunted, pained look.

She was haunted by what she had done to Ron while under an Imperious curse. It was time, Harry felt, to nip this in the bud before it got out of hand.

"Miss Granger," Harry said in his best teacher voice. "Since you have second period free, I want to see you in my office behind the DADA classroom. Mr. Weasley, you can pick her up in time for third period."

Everyone at the table looked startled. Hermione nearly squeaked in fright until she realized that it was Harry who was talking to her. She peered over at him. He gave her a slight smile, but the smile never reached his eyes and she realized that point that she was dealing with Professor Potter, not her best friend, the man she loved like a brother. Meekly, she nodded at him.

When Ginny tugged at his shoulder, he turned to look at her. "What are you doing?" She sent him.

Harry had taken over her Legilimency lessons when Dumbledore had finally stopped them and they had been using that method to talk to each other more and more often. It still required eye-to-eye contact for most things, however.

"I have to nip this in the bud Gin, before she does something stupid," he sent back.

"Are you sure? Why does it have to be you? Can't she and Ron work this out?" She asked pointedly.

"Maybe, but there isn't time and I'm the only one that knows what she's feeling," he replied. "I'm just going to show her what she's doing to herself and Ron by feeling this way, love. If I don't, she's going to lose all confidence in herself."

Ginny smiled and reached up to caress his cheek before turning back to her breakfast. Harry looked back at the table and noticed Dumbledore watching him over his half moon glasses.

"Legilimency is quite useful at times, is it not Professor Potter?" He asked, his eyes twinkling knowingly. "I've noticed that Miss Weasley has become quite skilled at it."

Harry smiled. "Yes Headmaster, she has. But she also recognizes its inherent dangers. For myself, I believe that, while it's not a Dark Art, its possibilities for abuse place it in a gray area. I dislike most of its uses."

"As well you should, Professor. Although, I will say that the use you've put it to is rather original. Most people prefer to wait for a soul bonding before achieving that level of communication. Be that as it may, I do have two things I would like to discuss with you. Firstly, I would like to meet with you in the entrance hall after you are done with Miss Granger. You and I have an appointment with Hagrid."

Harry smiled. "I would be honored to join you for that meeting, Headmaster. And the other issue you wanted to discuss?"

"Your clue about dual allegiances, Harry. Were you referring, perhaps, to Remus Lupin?" Asked Dumbledore smugly. He was sure he had him now!

Harry smirked back at his Headmaster. "Actually no, Headmaster. You made one mistake when you sent Hogwarts House Elves to help out at Grimmauld Place. You forgot that I own it. While that didn't bother most of the Elves, Dobby has been there 'helping' many times. And Dobby's allegiance is well known."

"And speaking of Grimmauld," Harry continued with a frown. "I suppose I should just give the place to Remus, once I meet with Voldemort. He's going to need a place to raise his family. Merlin knows I don't need it."

"However, back to the topic at hand. I must say, Headmaster, the first year students will probably enjoy your company for the next week. If you bring them some lemon drops, I'm sure they'll welcome you to the table," he concluded, smiling at Dumbledore.

Dumbledore's only reply was a pained expression.

"No offense Headmaster, but I think it would do you good to get closer to the students. Most of them look at you in awe, and a little fear. I understand your duties prevent you from teaching like you'd like to, but eating with them is an equally effective way of getting to know them," Harry said softly, without any hint of apology or reproach in his tone.

"Yes Professor, I have come to a similar conclusion myself only recently. My office is somewhat rarified and daunting. Perhaps I shall encourage the other faculty to do the same," Dumbledore replied thoughtfully.

Harry and Hermione...

One of the things Harry never expected as a teacher was the amount of paperwork he had to deal with. Writing up lesson plans and grading homework and tests was tedious at best, boring at worst. Standing in front of the students, teaching them, now that was where the real reward was!

Harry looked up from the desk he shared with Severus and Jack when Hermione knocked at the door and slipped into the room. He motioned her to the chair in front of the desk.

Hermione sat down and looked at Harry curiously. She was a little worried. His attitude that morning had been cold, and it wasn't something she was used to in her dealings with him.

"Tell me Hermione, do you blame me because your parents are now living in hiding?" he asked in an even tone.

"Of course not, Harry! I'd never blame..."

"Do you blame me because I led you and four others to the Department of Mysteries and ended up getting you severely injured and my godfather killed?" he asked her pointedly.

"No, I..."

"Do you blame me for letting you get paralyzed by the Basilisk in our second year? Do you blame me for the hundreds of muggles that have been kissed by Dementors in the last year? Or the dozens of students who have become orphans?"

"No..."

"THEN WHY ARE YOU BLAMING YOURSELF FOR SOMETHING A DEATH EATER DID?" he shouted at her, standing up.

Hermione reeled in her chair. His last comment was like a physical blow to her.

Walking around his desk, he knelt by her chair and grabbed one of her hands. "Mione, I know exactly what you're feeling, and I know where it will take you. You look outside on a sunny day and it might as well be midnight. Everything seems drab and dark. This guilt will tear away at your soul until it hollows you out and leaves you empty. It will tear you apart, hurting Ron and everyone else who loves you in the process.

"Sooner or later, you'll figure life is too hard to live. That's why you have to stop it now, today. You have a man who loves you with all his heart. He hasn't forgiven you, because he knows there's nothing to forgive. You weren't in control of your actions that day. You didn't hurt Ron. Krum did.

"You don't want to walk down this path, Hermione. I've been down it and I'm telling you, if you continue, it will destroy everything and everyone you love," he concluded softly.

Hermione looked away, staring at the floor. She bit her bottom lip, trying to stop its trembling. "I know I wasn't in control Harry, but I can't help feeling responsible for it," she whispered, trying to hold back her tears.

"Mione, look at me," he urged. "Can you shake off an Imperious curse?"

She shook her head. "N-N-No, but you can."

Harry blinked in surprise. "Just because I can do something doesn't mean you can, or should, Hermione. Be honest with me please. Does it bother you that I have abilities and power greater than yours?" he asked her, wondering what her answer would be.

When she nodded again, refusing to look at him, he leaned back on his heels and released her hand. "Don't be envious, 'Mione. My life hasn't been a picnic and it's probably going to end next month! Merlin, I thought you were smarter than this!" he said angrily, getting to his feet. Hermione looked up at him, shocked.

"I can't believe this! 'Mione, there are only a handful of people capable of shaking off that curse, all extremely powerful wizards and witches. Your strength isn't your power; it's your mind! Yeah, I can fight it off. Yeah, I've got a lot more power than you. Big bloody deal! I'd trade it all, in an instant, for the chance at a normal, full life.

"Don't compare yourself to me, 'Mione. You can't and you really should be grateful for that. What you need to worry about right now is yourself and your man. He's hurting because he thinks he failed to protect you. And you're so busy wallowing in guilt you never even noticed it!" he stated emphatically.

Harry moved to his desk and sat down. He took off his glasses and wiped his face tiredly with one hand before putting them back on. "Ron needs you and you need him. Let him help you. Talk to him, cry on his shoulder, or just hold him and let him talk to you. If you shut out the ones who love you, it kills you inside. I know what it's like."

Hermione's expression ran a gamut of emotions before she broke down, crying in her chair. Harry opened a drawer and extracted a box of tissues, which he slid across the desk to her. Through her tears, she smiled gratefully at him and pulled the box closer. After a few minutes, she regained her composure and dried her tears.

"Ron will be here in a little while," Harry said quietly. "Why don't you wait for him? I have a few more papers to finish grading, and then I have to go meet Dumbledore. You can use the office to talk, if you want." he offered.

When Harry went back to grading, Hermione watched him for a moment, her mind whirling with everything he had said.

Ron's hurting because he failed to protect me? That bloody loveable fool, she thought angrily. If he hadn't used his ring, he'd be dead and I'd be before Voldemort now. How can he be so stupid!

Then it dawned on her. Both she and Ron were hurting over this incident, for different reasons perhaps, but they were both hurting nonetheless.

She decided that today, even if it meant skipping a class, she and Ron where going to find time to talk. And what of Harry? She wondered. Does he really expect to die in a months' time? She watched him and, as much as he claimed to hate grading papers, he seemed to enjoy doing it anyway.

Then Hermione noticed his hand was trembling as he reached for another parchment. The color seemed to drain from his face. He froze for a moment, and then fumbled in one of the desk drawers. Reaching in, he pulled out a small pot, which Hermione recognized as his salve. He scooped out a large dollop and rubbed it into his scar.

It took a moment for the additional salve to take effect. Once it had, he closed his eyes in relief and sagged backwards in his chair.

Hermione got up and walked over to him. "Harry," she asked, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Are you alright?"

He opened up his eyes and looked up at her. "I'm fine. I think Voldemort is playing at the moment. Normally it doesn't bother me, but this time it's burning right through the salve."

"We're here for you, Harry. Never forget that," she said sympathetically.

"I know, 'Mione. But in the end it will still be just him and me, alone. Listen, Ron should be here soon. I need to meet with Dumbledore. We're going to talk to Hagrid today," he replied.

She nodded and watched him with a worried expression as he left the office.

Hagrid Goes to School...

Harry met up with Dumbledore in the Entrance Hall. Dumbledore's eyebrows rose in question when he noticed the large amount of salve on Harry's scar.

"Problems, Harry?" he asked, the concern evident in his voice.

"Voldemort's up to something, Headmaster. Something big, I think. This is the first time since the summer that he's taken a personal hand in it. And whatever he's doing, he's enjoying it greatly," he replied.

"In that case, I suggest we cancel our meeting with Hagrid so I can go alert the Order. We must find out what he's doing," said Dumbledore gravely.

"Headmaster, give me the paperwork and I'll go talk to Hagrid. I think I could use the distraction anyway. Since I have some free time, I may even take him to Ollivanders."

"Would you like me to make a portkey for you?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry looked at him sheepishly and Dumbledore laughed.

"So, you've learned how to create them yourself. Am I correct?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry nodded. "Yes, Headmaster. I had the book and Hermione made the first successful one, but I don't have any problems with them now."

Dumbledore shook his head and smiled while handing Harry a sheaf of parchments. "Very well, Harry. Give my regards to Hagrid."

"I will, Headmaster."

Harry turned and left the castle, heading for the main gates. Hagrid's hut was outside the castle walls and that was something Harry was going to have to fix.

He smiled as he passed students returning from their Care of Magical Creatures class.

Hagrid met Harry at the door to his hut. "Harry! How are yeh?" asked the half giant.

"I'm fine Hagrid," he replied with a grin. "The Headmaster was going to come with me, but he's been detained on Order business. So I'll handle this myself."

"Handle what, Harry?"

Harry rummaged through the sheaf of papers that Dumbledore had given him before finding the correct ones. He handed the first parchment to Hagrid.

"This is an official revocation of your expulsion, Hagrid. It's been signed by the Headmaster, endorsed by the Board of Governors and approved by the Ministry. It's an official acknowledgement that you were not involved in the opening of the Chamber Secrets all those years ago."

Hagrid sat heavily in his chair, causing many of the items on his shelves to rattle. His hands trembled as he read the paper.

"Now Hagrid, before I give you the next two parchments, I want a promise from you," Harry began. "As you are aware, we're expecting the castle to be attacked soon. For that reason, I want you to move inside the castle for the month, starting April first."

"Bu' Harry, this 'ere is my home," he protested.

"I know Hagrid and it still will be. I just want to make sure you're safe. You won't be if you're outside the walls," Harry replied.

Hagrid looked at Harry, seeing the concern written on his face.

"It's only for a month Hagrid," Harry said gently.

Hagrid finally relented, nodding in agreement to the request. Harry smiled. Knowing Hagrid would be on the inside of the walls once the battle started was a relief.

"Alright then, the next two items," he said handing them over to Hagrid. "One is a pledge from the teachers to tutor you up to at least OWL proficiency. The second is a letter from the Headmaster, co-signed by the Minister of Magic, telling Ollivander that it's all right to sell you a new wand. If you'd like, I'd be honored to take you to Diagon Alley today to make that purchase," he offered.

This was the moment Harry was dreading. Hagrid's eyes filled with tears and, with two massive hands, he pulled Harry into an embrace that had him seeing spots from lack of oxygen.

"Me own wand? I kin 'ave me own wand?" the big man blubbered.

Harry tried to reply but, since Hagrid hadn't released him, he was more concerned with breathing than talking. A moment later Hagrid released him so he could blow his nose. Harry staggered back and gulped in air.

Gasping, Harry looked at his friend and tried to smile. "Yes Hagrid, we're going to get you a wand at Ollivander's. Since your old wand was broken when you were unfairly expelled, it's only right that it be replaced, now that the Ministry acknowledges it made a mistake. Besides, wouldn't it be better to have a whole wand, rather than broken pieces hidden in an umbrella?" he asked, grinning slyly.

Hagrid looked shocked, then sheepish as he realized that everyone probably knew about his umbrella.

Harry looked around and found a small piece of firewood. He grabbed the wood and murmured "Portus" over the piece, then looked at Hagrid. "Ready to go get your wand?" he asked with a silly grin. This was something Harry was going to enjoy, taking Hagrid to Diagon Alley, like Hagrid once took him.

"Ready? I bin ready for nearly forty years!" replied Hagrid.

Hermione and Ron...

Ron opened the door to the office Harry shared with Professors Snape and Parsons and poked his head inside.

"Mione?" he called softly. Harry might have developed a good relationship with Snape, but Ron was still suffering from five years of Snape intimidation. A pair of hands grabbed Ron by his head and pulled him inside, then pushed him up against the door forcing it shut.

Ron leaned back against the wood in surprise, his arms hanging limply at his sides. Hermione had him pinned with one hand, shaking a finger under his nose with the other.

"Ronald Bilius Weasley! How stupid can you be? You saved both of us by using your ring that day. Oh, you stupid man. You bloody idiot. If it weren't for your actions, you would be dead and I would have ended up in front of Voldemort!"

With that last statement, her anger collapsed and she leaned against him, her head on his shoulders. "You saved us, Ron," she whispered before pulling him down for a kiss.

Once they came up for air, Ron asked, "So, what did Harry want?"

"He had a lot of things to say to me. I didn't like hearing some of what he said, but I know it was necessary, Ron," she said in a soft trembling voice.

"He didn't make you cry, did he?" asked Ron outraged.

Hermione nodded.

"I'LL KILL THAT BLOODY WANKER!" Ron shouted.

Hermione grabbed him by both shoulders and shook him. "You will do no such thing, Ronald! He said exactly what needed to be said. He made me see what I was doing to myself, and us. Yes I cried, not because he insulted me, but because he made me see how I was hurting myself and you!"

"Oh Ron, I'm sorry I wasn't there to help you. I was so busy wallowing in my own guilt that I never thought of what you must be feeling," she said in a low voice.

Ron, his anger forgotten, leaned against her. "I'm sorry I didn't stop him, 'Mione. I'm so sorry..."

She stopped his speech by kissing him again.

"We need to move beyond this, Ron," she said a few moments later. "We can't change what happened, but in the end, you saved both of us."

Diagon Alley...

Harry and Hagrid landed in front of Gringots. Diagon Alley was crowded, but there were plenty of Aurors and Auror trainees present. It had become one of the Ministry's training areas for Aurors. Given the security that Diagon Alley was seeing these days, people were more willing to come out and shop.

It was only a short walk from Gringots to Ollivander's, but it was more than long enough for people to recognize Harry. Coupled with Hagrid, a half-breed, the whispering was running rampant.

"Does this happen to yeh of'en, Harry?" asked Hagrid.

"You have no idea Hagrid, no idea. When this is all done, I'm probably going to turn into a hermit just to avoid this," replied Harry looking very annoyed.

Hagrid placed a large, meaty hand on Harry's shoulders and nodded in understanding as they entered Ollivander's.

Like his last visit, the shop hadn't changed much. The many floor to ceiling shelves were filled with small rectangular boxes. Mr. Ollivander came bustling out of a back room and shuffled towards them.

"Mr. Potter and Hagrid! My word! I never expected to see you in here at this time of year, Hagrid." Turning to Harry, he asked, "So Mr. Potter, is there something wrong with your wand? A chip, or crack perhaps?"

"Ah, no Mr. Ollivander. I'm not your customer today. Hagrid, show Mr. Ollivander the note please," Harry replied with a small smile.

Ollivander took the note, put on a pair of reading glasses and moved closer to the window where the lighting was better. His lips moved as he read.

"My word! In all my years, I never would have thought to see such a thing," he exclaimed. Turning, he peered at the large man. "So Hagrid, a new wand! Yes. Yes. I think you will be almost as difficult to place as our young Mr. Potter here. But no matter, I do love a challenge. Hmm, if I remember rightly, you had a wand with a unicorn hair core. Wonderful wand, marvelous for charm work! Such a shame to see it broken. No matter, let's start by trying unicorn hair cores again."

Ollivander went and pulled down several boxes and laid them out on the counter. Hagrid took a wand that Ollivander offered him. He looked like he was holding a twig, as the wand was barely nine inches long. He gave it a wave, causing the door to the back room to blow off its hinges.

"No, not that one," Ollivander said, taking the wand back from Hagrid. They continued testing a variety of wands, wreaking all sorts of havoc in the shop.

"Mr. Ollivander, do you perhaps have something bigger for Hagrid? Most of those wands look like toothpicks in his hand," asked Harry, ducking as several wand boxes flew off the shelf to his right.

Ollivander looked thoughtful for a moment, then his eyes lit up. "Yes! Perhaps it might work. I was only planning on using it for our new sign, but...yes, it might work at that."

Ollivander shuffled off to the back room, stepping carefully over the door on the floor. In a moment he returned with a wand nearly three feet in length.

"I made this wand to hang under our new shop sign, but it's a perfectly real wand. Made of Willow, with a Unicorn stallion hair core. This just might do the trick," he exclaimed. He handed the large wand to Hagrid who immediately smiled at the comfortable feel of the larger wand as it glowed softly in his hand. Giving it a wave, it left a trail of sparkles in its wake.

"YES!" cried Ollivander. "The wand chooses. It knows every time!"

When Ollivander put the wand to the side on the counter, Hagrid started to fumble with his money pouch until Harry stopped him by placing a hand on his arm. The half giant looked curiously at Harry.

"I'll cover it, Hagrid. Besides, we're not quite done here." Turning back to Ollivander, he said, "Now for the real challenge, Mr. Ollivander. Hagrid will need a wrist holster and, given his size, it will need to be custom made. It should be summon proof, as well. Can you handle that?" he asked politely.

Ollivander nodded and took some measurements of Hagrid's wand arm. "Yes, we can do this. It will take a few weeks to have it made. I'll send it to you via owl when it's finished, shall I?"

"That would be great, Mr. Ollivander," replied Harry. "Charge all of this to my Gringots account, if you please."

"Bu' Harry, I kin..." protested Hagrid.

"I know Hagrid, but I insist. You bought Hedwig for me. I can never repay you for that, or the friendship you offered the scared young boy I was back then. Please, let me do this for you," he said quietly.

Hagrid pulled out a large handkerchief and blew his nose noisily. Stuffing it back into his pocket, he reached out and slapped Harry on the back gently, sending the young man staggering forward. "Alright Harry," he said simply.

The two spent a few more minutes conversing with Mr. Ollivander before returning to Hogwarts.

Hogwarts Staff Meeting, later that evening...

Harry took his place in the back of the room. He never felt comfortable attending these meetings, but he was slowly getting used to the idea. Things had gotten a little frosty between him and his teachers after he dropped his three remaining classes, but that was changing for the better again. Serena however, was still a bit put out with him. He kicked himself mentally and reminded himself to speak with her soon.

Seeing Dumbledore come in, most of the other teachers took their seats. No one was sure why this meeting had been called. Usually they met once per month, but this meeting was something special.

Harry was shocked to see how haggard and worn the man had become. When had this happened?

The Headmaster looked around to make sure everyone was paying attention before he began to speak.

"Early this morning, Voldemort and his forces destroyed the Durmstrang Institute," Dumbledore began, his voice heavy. "The staff and students were all killed and the castle was razed to the ground."

"Next week, a delegation from Beauxbatons, and a group from the Board of Governors of Durmstrang will be visiting Hogwarts to determine what shall be done with those students who were slated to begin attending Durmstrang this coming fall."

"The Durmstrang Board is unsure whether or not the castle will be rebuilt. In my opinion, it is quite likely that Durmstrang, as a school, will cease to exist."

"Our own Board of Governors will be here as well, to help with the process. They may or may not decide to drop in on some classes to see how well we are teaching our students," Dumbledore concluded.

"Albus, Durmstrang students here? Durmstrang is known for teaching followers of the Dark Arts," breathed McGonagall.

"I don't think that will be a problem, Minerva. If nothing else, think of it as a challenge turning these new students away from that path," he replied.

"Excuse me sir..." started Harry.

"Harry, in these meetings, we are all friends and equals. Albus will do just fine," Dumbledore said tiredly.

When Harry hesitated, the other teachers smiled. Most of them were Hogwarts graduates and had gone through the school with Dumbledore as Headmaster. They knew how strange it was to make the transition.

"Alright then Albus, how long with the Durmstrang people be here? I'm not casting suspicion on anyone, but for the sake of our own security, I think I'll want to stand down the Brigade while they are here," Harry said as Jack and Severus nodded in agreement.

"They will arrive on Monday and should depart either Friday evening or Saturday morning, Harry," replied Dumbledore.

"Thank you, Albus. I'll pass the word along to the Brigade. Everyone will enjoy some time off, I think."

"I hope so. I just pray they don't have another party. Last time, I found a whole squad trying to run races in the corridor, while wearing lampshades. I still say they got the fire whiskey from the Weasley twins," Jack said with a chuckle.

"That's nothing! Ten times that night I was awoken by the alarms going off as some boy tried to sneak into a girl's dorm," exclaimed McGonagall.

"I think you need to lighten up a bit, Minerva," Jack said. "I think we all need to remember what's coming, and the fact that some of these kids may not make it. We're asking students, some of them still kids, to do the work of adults. I'd say at this point anyone sixth year and up should be granted a little more leeway in what they're doing."

"I never thought I would say this, but I have to agree with Professor Parsons," Poppy said with a scowl. "The number of girls who have come to me asking to learn a contraceptive charm has tripled over past years. And for every one girl who asks, there are probably twenty others who are too embarrassed to do so."

Harry remained silent. He and Ginny were sharing a bed at least four nights a week, although they rarely made love. It wasn't that they didn't want to. They did, but both felt slightly guilty over the pleasures they were indulging in when others couldn't. Harry was certain that Dumbledore, and perhaps McGonagall, knew of Ginny's sleeping arrangements and had opted to say nothing. But they tried very hard to be discrete about it.

Dumbledore nodded. "I think that both Minerva and Jack have valid points. Let us allow the sixth and seventh years a little more freedom for now. We can reevaluate that situation at the end of April, if need be."

"The important thing is, we will have visitors in and around the castle come next Monday, and some of them may drop in to your classes. They will be observing only, but please grant them every courtesy if they do visit your class," Dumbledore said, looking at each teacher in turn.

The meeting broke up shortly after. Harry stood and stepped over to Serena, asking if he might have a word with her before she left. Severus stood nearby watching the two curiously.

"Professor, about my dropping potions. I know your upset, but please don't be. It wasn't any reflection on you or your teaching. I did it so I would have more time to prepare," Harry said, the plea evident in his voice.

Serena sighed and looked at Harry intently. "I know, Harry. It was just that you were showing so much promise in the class. It's not often that a teacher has a student who's earning an outstanding grade, then suddenly drops the class," she said.

"I promise I'll either retake the course over the summer or repeat it next year, Professor. I didn't drop it to insult you, and I value the support you and your husband have shown me over the past two years. I'd hate to think dropping your class would hurt that," he replied quietly, his gaze skimming over the obviously eavesdropping Severus.

Serena reflected on her behavior towards Harry since he had dropped the class. She had been somewhat cold and, how did the British put it? Stroppy, Shirty. Oh hell, she had been bitchy towards him. Damn the British for ruining the English Language, she thought.

"I'm sorry about the way I've treated you since you dropped the class, Harry. It was wrong of me. I should've realized why you were doing it," she offered.

Harry smiled at her, accepting her apology. He bid them both a good evening. Returning to the common room, he informed the Brigade that, come Monday, they would have a week off.

The Library, two nights later...

Frank Littleton was a sixth year student. For months now, his friends have been trying to get him to see the error of his ways. They often met in secret, in little used places in the castle, to talk. He didn't mind, it was fun sneaking around and, to be quite honest, some of what his friends had been telling him made sense to him.

Tonight was an accident. He was working on a potions essay when he saw some of his friends accost a second year student. Catherine Marigold was a half blood. Her father was a muggle. Her mother was a witch and a prominent Wizarding healer at St. Mungos.

He peer out from behind the shelve to watch, but one of his friends spotted him.

"Frankie!" hissed one boy, grinning. "Come play!"

There were eight of them, six boys and two girls, and they had Catherine surrounded. She was being pushed back and forth between them as she wept. Frank walked around the shelf to join them. One of the boys grabbed the girl and tore at her clothing, opening her blouse and causing her skirt to tear away.

"Come on Frankie, feel up the baby half blood! We'll use a memory charm on her when you're done so no one will know!" said one of the girls with a giggle.

Two boys grabbed Catherine and pinned her by her arms. Frank had to admit, she was pretty, if not well developed yet. He stepped closer to the girl and she kicked him solidly in the thigh. She had aimed for his groin but missed by a few inches.

Frank winced in pain, his face contorted in anger. He grabbed her by the throat with one hand and roughly pawed between her legs with the other.

"Go Frankie!" hooted one of the girls.

Frank staggered back from Catherine suddenly. His Phoenix ring burned white hot on his finger. He screamed as the finger vaporized and the ring dropped to the floor.

As Frank bent over, trying not to vomit, a wave of magic rushed through the room with an eerie, howling noise. Bypassing the other students, the power, seeming to have a sentience of its own, surrounded Frank, bathing him in a sickly green light.

The light seemed to flow through the boy, almost as if being absorbed. When the glow subsided, he straightened, and then stiffened. As pain exploded throughout his body, he tipped his head back to scream but, rather than sound, light erupted from his mouth and his body nearly bent itself backwards as his magic was ripped from his essence.

When it was over, he fell to the floor, limply. Looking up, his gaze followed that of the other students. Floating above them was a red orb. Within the orb were flickers of black, almost like lightning.

As the other students cringed back, the orb exploded with a tremendous force, sending those standing flying away from the epicenter of the explosion and knocking them unconscious.

The Common Room...

"Professor Harry, show me that movement for Protego again. Please, please, please," asked Erika Lupin.

Harry smiled and showed her. Although a first year, and too young to be learning combat magic, Harry decided to teach the first years some of the basics of dueling, especially shielding.

Suddenly his ring throbbed painfully and grew hot around his finger. The castle trembled slightly. He looked over at Ginny with concern. She was unconsciously rubbing her hand, as if her ring was bothering her. So was Ron. Hermione paled and gasped, turning an appealing face to Harry.

"Harry," said Blaise, coming up from behind him. "What's going on with the rings?"

"Blaise, call out everyone. Search the castle. I'll explain later," he said grimly.

Blaise nodded and went to round up people. Harry turned to Hermione. "I know it's your curse that went into effect, but it's not your fault. Someone violated his or her blood oath," he told her gently.

"You two better head up to bed," he said, turning back to the Lupin twins. "It's getting late."

Eric looked like he wanted to stay, but Erika simply nodded and headed for her dorm stairway.

Roughly thirty minutes later, Blaise came back into the Common Room, looking grim. Harry turned from his friends and waited for Blaise to report.

"The library, Harry. I can't explain, you'll have to see it." Blaise said softly. At Harry's nod, Blaise spun and led him, Ron, Hermione and Ginny from the common room.

Minutes later, they entered the library and skidded to a stop, in shock. The section of the library where Frank Littleton lay with his friends was a total wreck. Books were torn and strewn all over. Several tables had been reduced to splintered wrecks and more than one shelf had toppled over. On the floor lay ten people. One with only nine fingers, one girl, who's clothing had been torn from her body, and eight others. Five of them were on the list of names Wan had provided Blaise.

Harry looked at the unconscious people and immediately bound all but Catherine with Incarcerous spells.

"Blaise, summon Madam Pomfrey and the Headmaster," Harry said. Then he peeled off his shirt and covered the unconscious second year with it. "Ron, collect the wands," he said, straightening up.

Harry stared down at Frank Littleton, Phoenix Brigade member and oath breaker, and his anger swelled along with his magic. His body exploded in a glowing nimbus of energy and the room groaned in response. His hands trembled with the power surging through him. He quickly spun away from the sight and walked to a window a few feet away and looked towards the Quidditch pitch, trying to calm himself.

Ron, Ginny and Hermione shared a look and, with a nod of understanding, Ginny left them and joined Harry.

Madam Pomfrey and Dumbledore arrived a few moments later. Dumbledore looked startled seeing Harry, his eyes fixed on a in the distance and Ginny whispering to him.

Madam Pomfrey rushed over to check the unconscious students. Dumbledore started towards Harry, but Ron stopped him with a wave of his hand. Dumbledore looked at Ron curiously.

"I wouldn't sir," he said softly. "He's in a right angry state at the moment. We apparently caught not only the people on our list, but a few others as well, including one Brigade member."

"I see, and how did they become unconscious?" asked Dumbledore.

"It was Mr. Littleton, Headmaster," began Hermione. "He violated his blood oath. That rendered him and everyone near him unconscious."

Dumbledore's eyes widened. "And what did the blood oath do to him, Miss Granger?"

"It collapsed his magical core, Sir. He's no more than a squib now," she replied in a hard tone. "We all took that oath at the start of the year. The oath he swore was to never go against the light."

Dumbledore sat down heavily on an unbroken chair. "A squib? You took away his magic?"

"No sir, I didn't take away his magic. He did that to himself," replied Hermione with conviction. "Everyone taking that oath knew the consequences of violating it."

Dumbledore squeezed the bridge of his nose for a long moment, his eyes closed. "Can it be restored?" he asked finally.

"No," Hermione replied simply, her voice tinged with steel.

"Headmaster, the first draft of that oath would have killed someone violating it. We choose the second version because it left them alive," Ron said softly. "Alive and in no position to aid our enemy or hurt another of our world. He can still live a long life as a squib or a muggle."

Dumbledore nodded in acceptance. He didn't like it, but there was little he could do. An oath was binding and it was an oath that had been broken.

Hermione turned to assist Madam Pomfrey in moving Catherine to a conjured stretcher. Several other teachers had arrived and were helping as well.

Dumbledore looked at Harry and Ginny. She was still talking to him, and he had finally turned away from the window to look at her. His glow hadn't diminished much and Dumbledore could see that his hands still trembling.

Dumbledore stood up and approached them.

"... I don't know Gin. I used to think I couldn't get angry, or at least stay angry. But I'm not so sure any more. I was enraged after the attack on Ron and Hermione. And now," Harry sighed heavily and rested his head atop hers, "When I came in here and saw what happened, I wanted to lash out, I wanted treat them like I would any other Death Eater. The only thing that stopped me from doing so was the fact that they were unconscious and what they'd done wasn't as bad as what a Death Eater would have done... It shames me and scares me more than I want to admit," he concluded quietly.

"Love, you're not like them. Look at yourself. You got angry, but instead of doing something to them, you walked away until you could control it. You didn't let your anger get the best of you this time. And there have been plenty of other times in the past when you didn't let your anger get control," Ginny replied. "You're too good for that, love."

Dumbledore stepped up and placed a hand on Harry's shoulder, causing him to look up. "It's called righteous anger, Harry. I know you've heard the term before. Anger is a powerful emotion, and even when you responded to the attacks on Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley, you did so in a controlled manner.

"There is nothing wrong with allowing yourself to get angry. In fact, you need to allow it. You cannot bottle up your emotions like that without harming yourself. Controlling your anger, recognizing the danger of giving in to it, that has been a key lesson you have both learned in the last two years."

Harry looked over at the bound figures, his magic still blazing. "Albus, about those 'students,'" he started, saying the word sarcastically. "We need to get them out of the school. Now that they've been revealed, they aren't safe from the other students. Or me..." he said, trailing off to a whisper.

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, I suspect you are correct. I will deal with them," he said, turning to walk back to where the other students still lay on the floor.

Harry looked down at the woman in his arms. The look she returned was full of confidence, understanding and support. "Where would I be without you?" he asked her quietly.

Somewhere in England, location unknown...

Destroying Durmstrang had been fun, but it wasn't satisfying, the Dark Lord thought to himself. It had been a nice spot of revenge against one of his people. And while certainly necessary as an example to the others, it wasn't the source of his anger.

"POTTER," he snarled. Yes, it was that brat's fault! He hid in Hogwarts with that other muggle lover and only came out to ruin his plans before retreating to his hidey-hole. It was Potter who had destroyed his home! Something must be done, he thought.

"Wormtail," he snapped, "I want you to arrange something for me."

Hogwarts, on the Battlements...

It was the sound of the explosions that first attracted Dumbledore to the battlements that now surrounded the castle. They came in intervals, roughly thirty seconds apart. Every so often there would be a burst of explosions four to five seconds apart. Between the explosions the sound of laughter could be heard.

Dumbledore walked up the stairway to the source of the laughter. On top of the battlements, he found the Weasley twins and Jack Parsons. Jack had what appeared to be a cross between a crossbow and stovepipe. He watched as Jack fiddled with the bottom of the device, and then placed it against his shoulder. He took aim and there was a small puff of smoke. Two hundred yards away from the battlements, there was an explosion.

The twins burst out laughing again and Jack snickered. Dumbledore coughed politely and the three men turned to look at him.

"Might I enquire as to what is so funny?" asked Dumbledore mildly.

Jack reluctantly handed the weapon back to Fred. "Good evening, Headmaster. I was just helping our resident geniuses here test one of their newest toys. It's similar to the old M-79 Grenade launcher used by the US forces in Southeast Asia back in the late 60's." Seeing Dumbledore's confused looked, he amended, "It's a way of launching the Weasley Grenade further. Nothing our Grenadier squads can use, but I can use the launcher."

Dumbledore nodded. "But I still fail to see the humor. The device does appear to be useful, and the noise is most intimidating..." He trailed off.

Jack shook his head. "It's those two, Headmaster," he said, pointing at the twins. "Apparently they've been experimenting with a magical version of the muggle laughing gas and their one test canister leaked."

The two Weasley twins grabbed each other and started howling with laughter.

Dumbledore looked at the two men with an amused twinkle in his eye. "Yes, I do recall that several of their pranks backfired on them in the past. It's nice to see that some things have not changed." Turning back to Jack he continued. "So I understand that, with this device, you'll be able to join in the fight?"

Jack nodded. "If you'll let me, of course. I don't have your advantages, but I do have the experience many are sorely lacking."

"We would be honored to have your help, Mr. Parsons." With another amused look at the twins, he bid them all goodnight.

First Year DADA Class, mid March...

The delegates from the two other school boards had arrived and, as predicted, were snooping around the castle. The first two days of meetings had been productive. Today everyone was taking a break, walking about the castle and relaxing.

Amelia Bones, in her role as Vice-Chairwoman of the Hogwarts Board of Governors, wanted to look in on some of the classes. She and Kingsley Shacklebolt were being shown around by Minerva McGonagall.

The three entered the Defense Against the Dark Arts Class for first year students. Severus was in the office that day, so Harry was running the class.

Instead of the normal class, all of the desks were pushed over to the side of the room and everyone was sitting on rugs Harry had conjured. Harry noted the arrivals and waved them forward.

"Class, we have some visitors today," started Harry. "I'd like you all to meet our Minister of Magic, Amelia Bones, and the Director of Magical Law Enforcement, Kingsley Shacklebolt. Someday, some of you may end up working for Mr. Shacklebolt."

The three moved to the front of the class where Harry was standing.

"I must say Professor Potter, you certainly do things differently. Rugs instead of desks?" asked McGonagall.

"We only do this occasionally, Professor. It makes them comfortable and allows them to move easier." Harry whipped out his wand and fired a stinging hex at Angelo Assanti.

The small boy cried, "Protego!" and the hex splashed harmlessly against the shield.

All three visitors shot Harry looks of amazement as the class, in one voice, cried, "CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" and broke into a fit of giggles. All three of the visitors, having dealt with Mad-Eye Moody one time or another, laughed out loud.

"I know they aren't supposed to know shielding yet, but I've been moving them beyond what's normal for a first year to know, considering our circumstances," Harry murmured to the three of them. McGonagall looked skeptical, but both Amelia and Kingsley nodded in approval.

"Let me show you some of what they've been taught so far," Harry said before turning back to the students. "Class, what are the three rules of action for a first year student?"

"Run if you see a Death Eater! Find help!" said the whole class.

"And if you can't run?" asked Harry.

"Hide and wait for help to find you," replied the class.

"And if you can't hide?" asked Harry again.

"Evade and escape," they replied.

Amelia looked at Harry, curious about the last answer. Harry grinned at her, then turned back to the students. "Erika Lupin, show the Minister how we evade and escape."

Erika bounced up from her rug and pulled out her wand. "Fomeus maximus," she cried, pointing her wand at herself. Suddenly, dense clouds of smoke started pouring off her, obscuring everyone. Kingsley barked in gruff laughter as he spotted her crawling under the smoke, using a camouflage charm.

Harry banished the smoke and thanked Erika for her help in the demonstration for the Minister and Mr. Shacklebolt.

"We don't teach the first year students to fight here, although every one of them has been taught proper aiming techniques," he started to tell Amelia.

He jumped suddenly and spun to look at his class. Eric Lupin had hit him with a stinging hex. As one, the class yelled at him, "CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" Then they broke up into another fit of giggles. It was a rare day when they managed to catch Professor Harry unaware.

"Alright, I want you all to read chapter twelve in your textbooks and prepare a one foot essay on the use of household charms to distract your opponent. Class dismissed," Harry said with a grin.

Watching the class warily as they filed out, he continued with his explanation. "Most of what they learn is still the basics that we all learned. But I try build upon that, using some simple charms and some basic shields. Every one of them can cast a Protego, and as much as I hate to say it, that may someday save a life."

"And you think it's all right for a student to hit a Professor with a stinging hex during class, Professor?" asked McGonagall.

"For your class? Of course not, Professor McGonagall. But these kids have permission to take shots at me when the rugs are out. They also know I'll be doing the same to them. It's a matter of learning to anticipate and to expect the unexpected."

Shacklebolt nodded approvingly. "Actually Minerva, it's not a bad technique. Did you see that little kid cast the shield? Merlin, I couldn't shield at his age! They've learned a few extra spells and have been taught to run from a fight. That's the proper thing to do for an eleven year old," he said.

"I must say Harry, I am quite impressed, not only with what your class has learned, but in your ability to teach them. Now, I don't mean to be a prying old bitty, but tell me what you know about this Slytherin, Zabini. The one my niece is so interested in?" said Amelia, her tone turning hard.

Harry looked at McGonagall, who could only shrug in reply. Even Shacklebolt looked uncomfortable at this sudden turn.

He heaved a sigh and ran a hand through his hair. "Madam Minister, Blaise is not a Slytherin. He's a student and the head of the Brigade Security. I would trust him with my life. I have, as a matter of fact. He's smart, he's dedicated. He comes across as sour and stiff, but he's really a caring individual if you spend the time needed to get to know him. He doesn't trust easily, but once you've earned it, he'll cover your back, no matter what the odds.

"He's as far from being like Susan as fire is to ice. But that's the attraction for them. He treats her with the utmost respect and love. I have no doubt in my mind that he loves her and she loves him."

Amelia stared long and hard at Harry before nodding. "If he's good enough for you Harry, then he's alright in my book," she said, then led Shacklebolt and McGonagall from the room.

Girls Dorm, after curfew...

Ginny was passing Hermione's bed when a hand snaked out from behind the curtain and pulled her in. For a moment Ginny couldn't see but, gradually, in the darkness, she could make out the older girl's form.

"Just what do you think you're doing, Ginny?" hissed Hermione. "I've seen you sneak out of here for the past two weeks and you've not been casting the contraceptive charm. Now spill it, witch!"

Ginny's eyes grew wet with unshed tears. "Y-Y-You're not going to tell anyone, are you 'Mione?"

"That will depend on the reason Ginny. Are you trying to get yourself preg...?" Hermione trailed off as she realized what Ginny was doing. "Oh Ginny, I'm sorry," she said quietly.

"It doesn't matter. Harry knew what I was trying to do. He told me he wouldn't allow me to dishonor myself like that. I begged him and he refused. Somehow he can detect the presence of the charm," she whispered back, her emotions barely held in check.

Hermione sat back on her bed, leaning up against the pillows. No, he wouldn't allow her to end up in that position, she thought. Ginny wants a child, just in case, and he turned her down. Would Ron do the same for me? Probably.

Harry loved Ginny deeply. But he also knew an unwed, pregnant witch was subject to scorn and ridicule from the rest of the Wizarding world.

"Ginny, you need to understand. He's not denying you because he doesn't love you. He knows what you'd go through if he didn't survive and you were pregnant. More importantly Ginny, it's probably shaken his confidence a little that you'd even ask it of him. He needs to know that you're certain he'll win. You want something from Harry? Make him believe with all his heart that, once this fight is over, he'll have a lifetime with you."

"I'm trying 'Mione, but I get so scared at times. Merlin's beard! I wish we didn't know when this bloody fight was! That's what's making me crazy," Ginny said.

"Me too," confided the older witch. "And I have to admit, I've thought about 'forgetting' the contraceptive charm myself a few times."

"You know," said Ginny softly, "there's only one real solution to this."

Hermione peered at the other girl in the gloom of the curtained off bed.

"Get all of us through this fight, then convince our parents we're not too young to get married," Ginny said with a steely tone.

Hermione shuddered. She didn't know which scared her more, fighting Voldemort or being within five hundred miles of a fight between Molly and Ginevra Weasley.

Meanwhile outside of the Room of Requirement...

Harry had just finished a late night training session. He only trained a few nights a week. Normally, he merged his training as much as he could with the Brigade's. But with the Brigade on stand down while the school delegates were here, he felt a little extra training wouldn't hurt. Tonight's had been especially brutal. Dumbledore was controlling multiple combat simulations and, just to add fun to the mix, Jack Parsons was standing behind Dumbledore, lighting off Weasley Wizarding Wheezes firecrackers to, as Jack put it, "Simulate the confusion of war."

Harry was tired and his ears were still ringing from a couple close explosive hexes. Consequently, he didn't hear the sound of footsteps following him as he walked along the seventh floor corridor.

He saw a motion out of the corner of his eye and, instinctively, he ducked. The blow would have landed with killing force but, by ducking, the morningstar struck a glancing blow. Harry crumpled to the floor, his head bleeding heavily.

The assailant stepped over the limp body, leaned down and placed a finger along the unconscious form's neck. Finding a strong pulse, she straightened up and was preparing to deliver a killing blow to the head when she paused. There was a sound behind her, like nails scratching on stone.

She whirled to face the new opponent.

In terms of natural chemical weapons, the Northern American Spotted Skunk, sometimes mistakenly classed as a Civet Cat, has one of the most potent chemical weapons of all the weasel families. The small animal facing the assailant simply turned around, raised her tail, and let loose.

The assailant screamed as the chemical cloud hit her eyes. More painful than muggle mace or pepper spray, the assailant staggered backwards as the skunk transformed itself back into the form of Susan Bones.

"INCARCEROUS," Susan yelled, effectively binding the assailant.

The assailant, still shrieking from the chemical assault to her eyes, tripped over Harry and fell to the floor. The sounds drew the attention of one of the nightly Brigade patrols.

Susan looked at the couple down near the end of the corridor. "Get Blaise and the others! MOVE and get Madam Pomfrey," she shouted as she bent over Harry. "Hang on Harry, help is coming."

Turning to the screaming assailant she cast a silencing charm on her.

The Seventh Year Dorms...

Ron was having a wonderful dream! There he was, famous Quidditch player, with Hermione, wearing a little see through number, hanging on his arm. Every so often, she'd jump up and down, causing some wonderful parts of her anatomy to jiggle enticingly, driving him wild. Then she started tugging on his shirt. The tug became more insistent as he slowly woke up. Finally, he couldn't take it anymore.

"Mione! Bloody hell, you're insatiable! We'll shag later. I'm about to get the award," he murmured.

It was the snickers that brought him fully awake as he realized he had said that out loud. Opening his eyes, he was just in time to see Neville roll off his own bed, laughing. Blaise, who was standing over him, was trying very hard not to laugh.

"Oy Ron, come on and get up. We've got a problem on the seventh floor. I'm not sure what the problem is yet. Susan was there and, before they could see what was happening, she told them to get help," Blaise said.

"Where's Harry?" asked Ron, now starting to worry.

"I don't know. I sent someone to check on Ginny, hoping that he's with her," Blaise replied tensely.

Ron quickly threw on a pair of pants and a t-shirt, then he slipped his feet into some slippers before following Blaise from the room. Down in the common room, they met up with Hermione and Ginny. It only took one glance for all of them to notice the absence of Harry. With Blaise leading the way, they bolted from the room.

The Seventh Floor Corridor...

Blaise led the group up towards the Room of Requirement. When they turned the corridor, they could see Susan at the far end, making motions with her wand. A strange, pungent smell wafted up the corridor to assail their senses. Closing with Susan, Ginny recognized Harry, lying motionless on the floor.

With a startled cry, she rushed forward, the others hot on her heels. Harry lay in a slowly expanding pool of blood. Looking him over, it seemed as though a piece of his scalp had nearly been torn from his head.

"He's got a good pulse, Ginny. It was a glancing blow. Somehow, Harry sensed it coming and ducked at the last minute," Susan said quietly.

"Blaise, we're going to need the Headmaster and some Aurors," started Hermione, but a voice interrupted her.

"I am here, Miss Granger, and Madam Pomfrey will be here in a moment," Dumbledore stated. "How is Harry?" he asked.

"Unconscious, Sir," replied Susan. "I was following one of the Durmstrang delegates when she pulled a weapon from one of the suits of armor. She snuck up on Harry and hit him from behind."

Susan was interrupted as Madam Pomfrey arrived and started to work on Harry. Dumbledore watched her for a moment as she ran diagnostic spells and healed the scalp wound. She sealed up the wound, stopping the blood loss, and then conjured a stretcher to carry him on.

Dumbledore turned back to Susan knowing that Madam Pomfrey would see to Harry's needs. "Continue your story, Miss Bones," he said gently.

"Well Sir, once she hit Harry, I incapacitated her, then bound her up," Susan replied. Dumbledore felt she was deliberately leaving something out.

"Tell me Miss Bones, just how did you incapacitate the assailant?" Dumbledore asked, his eyes twinkling merrily.

Susan blushed prettily and looked at her feet. Then she squared her shoulders and looked Dumbledore firmly in the eye. "My animagus form is a skunk, Sir."

Dumbledore's lips twitched like he wanted to smile, but he managed to contain it. "Yes, that explains the lingering odor I smell. A most potent weapon, Susan." Placing a hand on the girl's shoulder, he turned to Madam Pomfrey. "How is he, Poppy?"

"He's got a concussion, Headmaster, but he'll survive. The blow wasn't dead on. He'll need to spend a day or two in hospital, but he'll be fine," she replied wearily.

"Thank you, Poppy."

He watched a moment longer as Madam Pomfrey levitated the stretcher and moved it down the corridor, heading to the infirmary, followed by several others. Then he turned back to Susan. "Miss Bones, I know that you probably aren't that pleased with your animagus form, but there are advantages to every form, if you just look for them. Tonight, you saved Mr. Potter's life. You did very well, very well indeed." Turning to Blaise, he said, "Mr. Zabini, if you would bring our assailant to my office, we shall contact the authorities."

Blaise nodded and signaled two of his security people to levitate the assassin.

Hogwarts Infirmary...

Harry blinked his eyes a few times and his vision finally cleared somewhat, but things were fuzzier than normal. It took a moment for the headache to register. When it did, it was enough to make him moan in pain. He closed his eyes again.

"Harry," said a voice he knew very well.

"Ginny?"

"Yes, love. Now that you're awake, we can give you something for the pain. Don't try to sit up. You have a concussion. I'm going to put a straw in your mouth. Remember to drink all of it."

If it were possible for his face to screw up in more pain, then the taste of the potion would have done it. Normally, he gulped potions to avoid tasting them, but it wasn't possible to gulp using a straw. Finishing the potion, he started to reach for his glasses but Ginny stopped him.

"Gin?"

"You don't need your glasses for a while. Your vision's going to be a little extra blurry, and the glasses would only contribute to the headache."

"What happened? Last thing I remember was leaving the Room of Requirement a few minutes after Jack and the Headmaster."

"You were attacked from behind. I don't know the details, but Susan Bones was following one of the Durmstrang Delegates and saw her attack you."

Harry reached up to caress Ginny's cheek. From her tone, he could tell she was upset. Unfortunately, without his glasses, he ended up bumping her nose, causing her to blink in surprise before she realized what he was trying to do.

"Is everyone else alright, Gin?"

"Yes, we're all fine. You were the only one attacked."

"Awake are we?" asked Madam Pomfrey in her usual gruff tone.

Harry instinctively turned towards the sound of her voice and lifted himself on his elbows. The room spun wildly and he fought the urge to throw up the potion. Two sets of hands pushed him back onto the bed.

"I told you not to try sitting up, Harry," Ginny said with a note of authority in her voice.

Harry's face was pale as he waited for the vertigo to settle down. Closing his eyes, he didn't notice Madam Pomfrey running a few diagnostic spells on him.

"Mr. Potter, I'm not going to bother trying to send Miss Weasley to her dorm. Since she's had the medical training, she'll take care of you this evening. I expect we'll be able to release you some time tomorrow. Meanwhile, she has a potion, which you are to take every four hours. You should find the dizziness gone by morning," Madam Pomfrey said.

Ginny shot Madam Pomfrey a grateful look. Afraid to even nod, Harry murmured his thanks as he drifted off to sleep.

Headmaster's office...

Dumbledore sat behind his desk as Kingsley Shacklebolt and two Aurors listened once more to Susan's tale. The would-be assassin had already been transported to a Ministry holding cell. There, it was discovered that the Durmstrang Delegate was really a man, using a Polyjuice potion.

"As I understand it, Headmaster," said Kingsley, "Madam Armata was supposed to be part of the delegation, but has, according to the Norwegian Ministry of Magic, gone missing. We have alerted the other Ministries and are looking for her, but I believe it's probably safe to say she was killed so the assassin could take her place."

"Now, as to the assassin, he's a hit wizard for hire out of Germany. His name is Guntvig Hoosbrau. He's been implicated in over thirty assassinations. He does not carry the Dark Mark, however. Personally, I think this may be a direct attack on Mr. Potter in response to Mr. Potter's attack on Voldemort earlier this month," Kingsley concluded.

Dumbledore nodded. "I suspected that might be the case, Kingsley. Fortunately, Miss Bones was able to thwart it." Looking at Susan for a moment, he continued. "I would appreciate it if you were to keep her animagus abilities out of the official record for now. I expect she will register her form in a month or two."

Kingsley frowned and looked at Susan, who nodded eagerly. He shrugged and smiled at her. "I'm sure we can manage something. But I'd suggest she register with me, tonight, and I will conveniently forget to file the paperwork properly. This way, if it comes out during the trial, it can be blamed on a Ministry paperwork muck up."

Dumbledore nodded and handed Susan the paperwork to fill out.

Hogwarts Infirmary, late night...

Ginny shook Harry's shoulder. It was time for him to take another dose of the potion.

He stirred. "You know Mrs. Potter, sometimes you can be bloody annoying," he mumbled, half asleep. He then turned away from her and tried to go back to sleep.

Ginny nearly dropped the potion bottle in shock. "Harry, what did you just call me?" She could barely describe the thrill of excitement that coursed through her.

"Huh? What?"

"Harry," she said, shaking him harder. "What did you call me?"

Harry blinked and tried to clear the fog of sleep from his brain. "I'm sorry Gin, what's that?"

"What. Did. You. Call. Me." she ground the words out. She wanted to scream in frustration.

He blinked again and looked at her fuzzy outline in the dim torchlight. "I'm not sure," he replied hesitantly.

"You called me Mrs. Potter!" she exclaimed softly.

"Oh." Harry looked sheepish. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset..."

She stopped him by putting a finger on his lips. "You didn't upset me. It's just the first time you've even talked about me being Mrs. Potter. We've never even discussed the wedding, except to say that it will happen someday," she said softly.

"It's going to happen, Gin," he murmured. "I promise you that. And it will be as grand or as simple as you want. And all the Weasley family will be there, along with our friends. I'm afraid I'll be the only Potter present, though."

She grinned and placed the straw in his mouth for his potion dose. She knew he couldn't see well, but she'd fix that in a moment.

He drank the potion, trying not to gag at the taste. The headache and concussion induced sleepiness was already lessening. When he was done, he felt her move from the chair and lift his blanket. He moved over on the bed and she climbed in with him.

He smiled as her face swam into focus. He could see objects up close, it was distance where his problem lay. She lay on her side, one hand draped across his stomach. She propped her head up on her hand and looked at him.

"So, what do you envision our wedding to be like?" she asked gently.

"I'm not sure, Gin. I've only been to one wizard wedding and I don't know what options we have. To be honest, I sort of expected you tell me what you wanted in that regard. The only thing I do know is that I'm not allowing your parents to pay for it. This is our wedding and I won't burden them with the cost of it," he replied.

"Well, don't think I'm going to let you get away with calling me Mrs. Potter until we're married," she said teasingly, smiling at him.

Harry looked sheepishly at her. "N-N-No, I won't," he stammered.

"Good, but I have to admit, it's such a lovely name," she said before pulling him into an embrace.

She held him close and felt him relax against her. When his breathing evened out, she knew he'd fallen asleep once again. "Mrs. Potter," she murmured quietly. Yes, I do like the sound of that name, she thought.

The Common Room, the next evening...

Hermione sat on a couch, working on homework with Ron when she heard a noise. She looked up, startled to see all of the first year students standing around her. In front of the group were Dobby, Eric and Erika Lupin. The two metamorphs had made great strides in controlling their abilities, but still hadn't mastered that strange link between them. As a result, Eric, who was currently trying to give himself ears like Dobby, was also doing the same to his sister, much to her displeasure.

Erika stepped forward. "Is it true that Professor Harry is coming back tonight?" she asked. Since their adoption by the Lupins, they had settled down into two of the finest first year students Hogwarts had seen in a long time.

"Yes Erika, Harry will be released from hospital tonight," replied Hermione with a smile. She knew that the first years loved Harry. He was their friend, as well as their favorite Professor.

"Then we need to give him a party like he did for us," proclaimed Eric. Then he blushed for being so forward. His shyness was slowly falling away, but occasionally it still manifested itself.

Dobby stared at Hermione, his tennis ball size eyes wide and nodded solemnly.

Hermione looked at Ron and grinned. He shrugged and grinned back. A party would do much to relieve tension.

Suddenly her eye's narrowed. In the back of the first year crowd was a pair of red heads. "Fred, George! Stand up," she said with some asperity.

The two twins got up off their knees and looked at her sheepishly.

"Aw Come on Hermy..." started Fred.

"...a party is just what..." continued George.

"...all of us need," finished Fred.

Her eyes narrowed further at the use of the hated nickname the twins had given her. Ron was openly laughing now. "Oh, very well. But! Fred, George, I better not find a single drop of Fire Whiskey!" she stated emphatically.

The first years cheered, while the twins nodded. They'd find a way to sneak in some fire whiskey without Hermione knowing about it. Dobby returned to the kitchens to organize the food for the party.

An hour later, when Harry and Ginny entered the Common Room, Harry was surprised to find the entire student body lined up behind the first years. Everyone had black, unruly hair in honor of Harry's return.

An hour later, the staff started entering the common room. In a normal year, the teachers would have never joined a student held party. But this year was far from normal. And it was, after all, a party.

Chapter 14 - Farewells and Fights

Marking Time...

As March faded in to April, the tempo at Hogwarts sped up. First through third years were preparing for their trip to Beauxbatons. In Charms, Flitwick had scrapped his outline and had switched to teaching healing and defensive charms exclusively. Students in McGonagall's class were being shown how to transfigure objects into temporary shields. Even potions classes were brewing up healing draughts rather than their usual fair.

As promised, Hagrid moved into the castle on April first. The only available quarters that could be found for the large Professor were down in the dungeons, and even those had to be magically altered to allow him to fit comfortably.

Also on April first, boxes and boxes of supplies started to arrive from St. Mungos Hospital. The small room off to the side of the Great Hall was converted in to a storage area.

Whispers in the Dark...

Serena smiled as Severus entered their small kitchen/dining area. Normally, they'd eat in the Great Hall, but occasionally they had dinner in their apartment. No one but Serena would have believed just how romantic Severus could be. He was an intensely private man who had seen massive changes in his life during the past two years.

Severus didn't believe in public displays of affection. However, once in their private quarters, he could be a different man. Tonight, he wrapped his arms around his wife as she prepared dinner for them both. He nuzzled her neck and she leaned back into him. Somehow, he always knew what to do to make her respond.

He glanced over at the plain table setting and decided that wouldn't do. With a flick of his wand and few muttered incantations, he transformed the table into more romantic setting.

He dimmed the lighting and added a set of candles on the table, then had a house elf pipe in some soft music. Serena arched an eyebrow at him and smiled. Severus might intimidate the students, but as far as she was concerned, deep down he was a real softy.

He helped her put the food on the table and they sat down to enjoy what they both hoped would be a nice, romantic evening. Severus was about to say something to her when he frowned. There was a noise he couldn't place. Silencing the music for a moment, he could hear the strains of a lute and the off key mumblings of Hagrid. The large man's temporary lodging was just next door to theirs.

Serena looked at Severus with a pained expression. Then, hearing the lyric's of Hagrid's ancient ballad, she started to chuckle.

Then Aethelstan, king, Thane of eorls,
ring-bestower to men, and his brother also,
the atheling Edmund, lifelong honour
struck in battle with sword's edge
at Brunanburh.

Broke the shieldwall, split shields with swords.
Edward's sons, the issue of princes
from kingly kin, oft on campaign
their fatherland from foes defended,
hoard and home.

Severus made a face at Serena as her quiet chuckles turned to outright laughter.

"Well, I guess it is appropriate. We're coming up on a battle and he's singing battle hymns from the fifth century," he mumbled.

He cast a silencing charm on the wall. The sound was muted, but didn't entirely make it go away.

"Cast it on the door too, love. Silencing the wall only makes it stop coming from the wall. It's probably quite loud in the corridor," Serena said with a giggle.

Severus stormed through the living room and yanked open the door to the corridor. He stumbled back slightly as a wall of sound hit him. Hagrid's off-key voice was not the only sound to be heard. Fang had apparently decided that his master's flute wasn't enough, so the boarhound was howling the harmony.

Snape slammed the door shut in disgust and cast a silencing charm on it. Turning, he glared at his wife. She had followed him as far as the living room and was now slowly sliding down the wall, weak with laughter.

"I'm going to hang Harry from the astronomy tower for this," he growled into the blessed silence of the room. Serena, now sprawled on the floor in an unladylike heap, only laughed harder. Dragging his weak wife back to her feet, he marched her back to the dining room.

Sitting down to complete their meal, they spent several hours discussing their day, and what they had to do tomorrow. Severus was reaching for his drink when he felt it. A vibration unlike anything he had ever felt before. Startled, he looked down and saw the brandy in his glass rippling. Rippling? Sloshing would be a better term. With a snarl, he threw down his napkin and rushed to the door. Jerking it open, he was assaulted by a new sound.

"Merlin's balls!" he shouted over the din of Hagrid's snoring. "No wonder he sleeps in a hut away from the castle. The man's a menace!"

When Serena started laughing once more, he slammed the door closed and snarled at her. His perfectly planned evening was now shot to hell!

For one brief moment, Snape-the-Bastard was loose in their chambers. As he stalked towards her, wearing the expression that caused students to flee from his path, his wife simply held up her hand. He stopped, and then scowled once he realized what he'd done. As he opened his mouth to lash out at her, she grabbed his hand and led him into the bedroom.

Upon entering the room, Serena stopped so suddenly, her husband nearly ran her down. Her eyes widened as she gazed around the room. She hadn't realized that this room was next to Hagrid's bedroom. Bookshelves trembled, pictures danced against the wall, and the bed shook.

When her husband cursed, she turned around and grinned at him. "Did you know that, in the States, a muggle can rent a room with a bed that vibrates just like this? Just think, we're getting it for free," she said wickedly.

Severus stared at her for a moment and she held her breath, unsure of his reaction. Then he bent slightly, picked her up and tossed her lightly onto the bed, ignoring her shriek. Following her to the shaking mattress, he loomed over her.

"All right, so the man isn't completely useless," he growled. When she started to laugh, he silenced her with a kiss. He was going to salvage what he could of this evening, even if it killed him.

Farewell to the Twins, April Fifth...

The morning of April fifth broke bright and sunny. There was a palatable tension within the castle and all classes had been cancelled. After Breakfast, the first through third year students were congregating in the Great Hall, waiting for the portkeys that would take them to Beauxbatons.

Harry and his friends walked through the hall talking to a few of the younger students. When he found the Lupin twins, he knelt down on one knee to talk to them both.

"I want you two to be especially good for the Professors, hear me?" asked Harry, trying to sound stern. Both the twins nodded in reply. They were scared. They couldn't help but notice the tension that had been building in the castle and the rumors that were flying about.

"You'll be here when we get back, won't you Professor Harry?" asked Erika softly looking at him fearfully. Eric was holding his sister's arm and looking at Harry.

"I hope so, squirt," he said with a smile. Suddenly both of them grabbed him in a hug. He wrapped his arms around them. "Merlin protect you both," he whispered, fighting back tears. Ginny, sensing he was really saying goodbye to them, turned to her brother and started crying softly. Ron put an arm around her and Hermione.

Harry stood up and ruffled the hair on Eric's head, smiling. He then turned to Ron and his eyes flickered to Ginny once. "Ron, I have some things I need to do today. When the Ministry contingent arrives, you'll have to meet with their commander for me."

Ron nodded mutely as Harry strode from the hall, refusing to look anyone in the eye.

His first stop was the Headmaster's office. Dumbledore was sitting behind his desk, surprised to see Harry.

"Come in Harry, come in," said Dumbledore.

"I'm sorry to disturb you Headmaster, but I came here to talk to Fawkes for a moment," Harry said in a strangely neutral tone. Fawkes straightened on his perch and cocked his head, eyeing Harry.

"So Fledging, you know, at last, what you must do?" he asked.

"I do, Fawkes, and I will get to it soon. I have a few minor things I need to take care of first," Harry replied.

Dumbledore watched this strange conversation between Harry and his phoenix in amazement. He knew Harry could talk directly to Fawkes but had rarely witnessed it.

"Is everything ready, Fawkes?" asked Harry

"Soon, Fledging. Be patient and listen to the heart. Hear the joy of its song and be at ease. All will be ready when the time comes. We will meet at the appointed time. I know what I must do as well. We each have a task to complete when the time is ripe."

Harry nodded and faced Dumbledore. "Thank you Sir, for your help and your support in all of this. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some affairs to attend to. Please don't worry Albus. All will become clear soon enough," he said softly. He turned then and left the office, leaving a dumfounded Dumbledore watching his retreating back.

By noon, the first through third year students had left on their trip to Beauxbatons. Another group of students, this time from the fourth and fifth years, was also leaving on a special early Easter holiday. Some of the students from those years had volunteered, with their parent's permission, to remain behind and help in the infirmary or running for supplies.

Ron noticed there was no sign of Harry at lunch, and none of his friends knew where he was. Ginny was especially worried, but Ron held her back from searching the castle. He told her that, if he didn't show up by dinnertime, he'd personally order an all hands search of the castle.

When dinner came and went with no sign of Harry, Ron told Blaise to order out the entire brigade to search the castle and the surrounding area. Ginny and Hermione were worried sick about him. Ron was too, but he tried not to show it.

When Blaise reported that no signs of Harry had been found in the castle, the search was expanded to the areas around the school, and all the teachers turned out. Eventually, Dumbledore involved the Order. They expanded the search area once more to include Hogsmeade and the train station. Nothing was found.

(April Sixth) Breakfast, Great Hall...

The next morning started with an exhausted Phoenix Brigade and staff. Everyone had been up late before Dumbledore called off the search. Ron, Hermione and Ginny trudged down to the Great Hall for breakfast.

Dumbledore sat down at their table. The hall was much emptier than in previous days. More than half the students had either gone off to Beauxbatons or returned home. Dumbledore eyed Harry's friends and knew there wasn't much he could say to cheer them up, but he had to try. Ginny looked like she hadn't slept a wink last night, and the others didn't look much better.

"I did a little research last night, looking through some old manuscripts and journals," the Headmaster began, catching everyone's attention. "In an old journal, which I believe to be one of the few remaining works of Rowena Ravenclaw, I came across an interesting entry.

"As you are aware, shortly after the construction of Hogwarts, the four founders helped defeat a Dark Lord who had been terrorizing muggle and magic born alike. According to Rowena's entry, Godric vanished for a whole day before the final battle. They searched extensively for him but could not find him. A day later, he appeared with no explanation, except to say he had some things he needed to do.

"I cannot help but reflect on what Harry said to me before he vanished. He also said that he had 'some affairs to attend to'. If what I suspect is correct, Harry will return later today, before the evening meal.

"Hopefully, that will cheer everyone up. In the meantime Mister Weasley, you and I have a meeting with Professor Parsons and the commander of the Ministry Defense Forces after lunch. Then Professor Flitwick and I will be doing some work in the Great Hall to enhance its size."

"Do you really think Harry will be back, Headmaster?" Ginny asked in a small voice.

Dumbledore reached over and patted her hand kindly. "If there is one thing I have learned about your young man Ginevra, he is the most resourceful wizard I have ever had the privilege to know. Yes, I believe he'll be back."

Silently, they all prayed that Dumbledore was correct.

(April Sixth) Deep inside Hogwarts...

Deep in the bowls of Hogwarts, not far from the Heart Chamber, there exists a small room that, in times past, was called the Sanctuary. The Sanctuary was drab at best. Ancient tapestries, now faded and frayed, hung from its walls. There was a crude stone pallet to lie upon and, nearby, a large spring fed pool of water. A stone pedestal lay in the exact center of the room. Atop the pedestal was a stack of clothing that looked new, despite being of archaic cut and design.

At one time, the Sanctuary was known only to the Headmasters. As it was used less and less through the centuries, knowledge of the room drifted from fact to legend to fairy tale, until it became lost altogether.

Now, within the Sanctuary, lay a solitary naked figure, glowing softly on the stone pallet. Surrounded by darkness, the figure was lulled by the rhythmic vibrations caused by the nearby Heart Chamber. His more modern clothing had been discarded long before he ever entered the room. The man on the pallet was still and, were it not for the fact that his chest rose now and again, one would think him dead.

As the man lay, two images slowly formed on the skin of his upper arms. On his left arm, a Phoenix appeared. On his right, the symbol of Hogwarts, a golden sunburst crossed by a sword and a wand.

(April Sixth) The Burrow...

"Damn you, Arthur! You're too important. You're a Deputy Minister, for Merlin's sake!" Molly yelled at her husband.

"Molly, please. The Minister is going to be there and so am I," he replied in a reasonable tone.

"Arthur, you can't be there. One of us has to stay, for the sake of our children," Molly pleaded, starting to cry now.

Arthur held his weeping wife. He knew from experience that her tears were only in an intermission until she had recovered enough control to start yelling again.

Another voice broke through Arthur's reverie.

"Mum, Dad, you can fight over this all you want. In the end, we all know that, if Harry loses, we all lose. We owe it to him, and to our family, to support him," said the voice.

Both Molly and Arthur turned to see Percy standing in the doorway of the kitchen. Bill and Charlie stood behind him. Arthur was silently thankful for the support being shown by his sons, and never, ever, had he been as proud of them as he was today.

"I learned the hard way what it means to desert my family and I refuse to make that mistake twice. I may not be a great fighter like Harry, or Ron, but I'm here to help in any way I can," Percy said with conviction.

Molly walked over to Percy and hugged him tightly, her eyes still streaming with tears. "Alright then, we Weasley's stick together. I already have four sons and a daughter going into harms way. We need to be there for them," Molly declared, smiling at her boys.

Arthur smiled at his wife and sons. "Right then, let's apparate to Hogwarts and see what we can do."

A moment later the Burrow was silent as clan Weasley went to war.

(April Sixth) Meeting of the Commanders (Late Afternoon)...

The command team for the Phoenix Brigade met with the commander of the Ministry Defense forces. The Ministry forces had been set up, per Jack's suggestion, into companies of fifty people. Each company consisted of four combat squads and one grenadier squad. The Phoenix Brigade used the same organization.

All in all, there were a total of nine companies. Three from the Phoenix Brigade, and six from the Ministry. Alastor Moody had overall command, with Ron as his second. Harry and Dumbledore had placed themselves above Alastor Moody in the command structure at Alastor's insistence. Jack Parson's didn't fit anywhere within the organizational chart, despite prodding from both Harry and Alastor over it. Jack's reply was that he preferred being able to freelance, whatever that meant.

The Phoenix Brigade had trained every evening for more than a month with the Ministry defense forces. Today's meeting was more of a formality than a strategy session. Although, starting tonight, there would be posted sentries all night long on the battlements.

"... Alright, the next issue on the agenda is Hogsmeade," said Jack Parsons, as he faced the company and brigade commanders. "The Ministry has, with the help of the Order, distributed nearly two thousand dated portkeys to the residents of Hogsmeade. The portkeys are activated by tugging on them, and will move the person from Hogsmeade to a Ministry relocation center in southern England. Evacuation of Hogsmeade is set to begin early tomorrow morning. Additionally, some one hundred residents have informed us they would like to help, either in fighting, or help any wounded. Those volunteers have been told to arrive at the castle gates no later than 8 A.M. tomorrow.

"The goblin contingent is expected to arrive tomorrow, between seven A.M. and eight A.M. I'm told that the commander of their forces will be a goblin named Tarmac. I'll remind everyone present that you are to go over the basic information again with your people tonight about interacting with goblins. And for Pete's sake people, let's not start a war by smiling at them!

"Madam Pomfrey says that St. Mungos has provided her with three trauma healers, one burn specialist and two regular healers, as well as six medi-witches. St. Mungos has cleared enough beds to take any overflow, but we'll not be able to transport wounded to St. Mungos until such time as the fighting has ceased.

"Alastor, you'll hold Golf and Hotel companies in reserve near the entrance hall. I want them to be able to back up any trouble spots as they appear. If necessary, we'll reinforce at the squad level.

"Now, Harry thought about leaving half of the goblin force outside the gate. It's not a bad idea, but if that force gets in to trouble, we'll be unable to help them without opening the gates. Since we haven't had the

chance to train with them, I propose a more flexible deployment, spreading them out between the squads on the battlements or perhaps in the courtyard in front of the gates...

"Speaking of Harry," interrupted Alastor, "where is he? I haven't seen him at all since we arrived."

Jack shot a glance at Dumbledore, who thankfully intervened for him. "Harry is away at the moment and is expected back before nightfall."

Moody raised an eyebrow at Dumbledore. He wasn't raised yesterday and knew a snow job when he heard one. He'd give Dumbledore his time before he'd pin him up against the wall and get an answer to his question.

(April Sixth) Hogwarts, by the entrance to the Great Hall..

Ginny and Ron stopped in their tracks in surprise when they spotted Molly, Arthur, Bill, Charlie and Percy. A moment later, Ginny was clutching at her mother, sobbing. Arthur looked at Ron curiously.

"Harry's missing. No one's seen him for nearly a day now," Ron said tensely.

The other Weasley's stared at Ron aghast. Molly's face paled. "Missing?" she whispered.

"Yeah. Dumbledore seems to think he'll be back by dinner, but who knows?" Ron said with a shrug.

Molly grabbed Ron and pulled him into her embrace with Ginny. After she let him go, she repeated her actions with Hermione.

"What are you all doing here?" Hermione asked after regaining her breath from a patented Weasley hug.

"We're here to help any way we can," Arthur replied with conviction.

"I don't know about my brothers, but I'm not sending my little sister into battle without me helping her," declared Charlie. Ginny looked up from hugging Molly and gave her oldest brother a wan smile.

Molly wiped the tears from her eyes. "Well, let's not block the entrance any more. Let's go inside and say hello!"

(April Sixth) Deep inside Hogwarts...

How long Harry Potter lay at the bottom of the pool in Sanctuary, he couldn't say. When he awoke, he felt a compelling need to immerse himself in the pool. He had just settled into the water when he felt a strange drowsiness come over him.

Closing his eyes, he slipped beneath the surface of the water, floating, suspended there. For how long? He couldn't say. All he knew was, when he finally came to his senses, he felt strangely purified.

When he stepped out of the pool, some unknown charm dried him. He felt calm and at peace as he stepped up to the pedestal to put on the clothing he found there. He was surprised to discover that, during his stay in this room, he had received two tattoos. The tattoos weren't the only change. Sometime during his immersion, his hair had grown longer, falling now to his shoulders.

He examined the clothing closely before he put on the sleeveless black and gold trimmed robe and matching pants. The clothing resized itself to match his frame. It was warm and lightweight and seemed to give him an

unprecedented freedom of movement that he had never experienced before. The last item he found on the pedestal was a red and gold ribbon. He looked at it curiously before realizing what it was for. He used the ribbon to tie off his hair into a pony tail. Harry smiled to himself, wondering what Ginny's reaction would be to his new look. It was probably the one thing he looked forward to most of all.

Fully dressed, he had one task left to complete, but he sensed that Hogwarts was giving him some time off first. It wasn't quite time to complete that task. With a small pop, Harry Potter vanished from Sanctuary, never to return.

(April Sixth) Grimmauld Place...

Tonks watched her husband as he paced back and forth in their room. Jason was in his own room, playing. Her son's location was a relief since, if she read the signs correctly, they were about to have their first major fight since their marriage.

"Oh Remus, sit down before you wear a hole in the rug. You knew this was going to be a problem. You've known about it for months," she said with some asperity.

Remus ran a hand through his graying hair. "Tonks, you don't understand. This is Harry we're talking about. I have to be there!"

"No Remus, you talked me into going onto the inactive list because I couldn't be risked for the sake of the children. The same reasoning applies to you and you damn well know it!" she growled back at him.

"Tonks, I promised his parents. I can't let James and Lily down. Nor can I let Sirius down. I promised," he said softly, his eyes starting to grow moist with tears.

Tonks stood and walked over to a desk. Opening a drawer, she removed a piece of parchment and thrust it at him. "Here! I hoped I wouldn't have to use this, but I see I have no choice," she said, her own eyes now wet with unshed tears.

With trembling hands Remus started to read.

Remus,

You are my friend, my last link to my parents and Sirius. If you're reading this, then you and your beautiful wife are fighting over your coming to Hogwarts to help in the fight.

Remus, you old Marauder, in a word...Don't. You have three wonderful children that I love like brothers and sisters and they must have their parents, both of them.

I can't begin to describe how important you are in my life. Your part of my family and I will treasure that always. I know Mum, Dad and Sirius are all watching and would approve of you taking care of your children. They know what you've done for me and what you would have done, had you been given the chance.

Stay with Tonks and Jason, my friend, they need you more. I need you all to stay safe. And hopefully, if all goes well, you will be able to take my father's place when I get married. I'd really like that.

Love,

Harry

As he finished reading the letter, he slipped to his knees, weeping. Tonks knelt beside him, holding him while he cried against her shoulder.

"Are you going to stay?" Tonks asked softly.

Remus could only nod against her shoulder.

"Harry dropped that letter off for you a few days ago. I didn't think I needed it, but I'm glad he brought it by," she whispered.

(April Sixth) The Great Hall, Dinner...

The Great Hall was strangely quiet, considering there were nearly six hundred people in it. The tables, like the room itself, had been expanded to accommodate the extra people. Ministry Defense forces, even most of the Order members, were present.

Albus Dumbledore waited until most of the people had seated themselves before he stood and walked to the front of the hall. As the crowd spotted him, a hush fell over those few talking. It was well known by now that Harry Potter was missing. Dumbledore had to say something to raise the spirits of the defenders.

Dumbledore smiled at the crowd, his eyes twinkling merrily. "Friends, we stand on the eve of a momentous occasion, the likes of which have not been seen for a thousand years. Each one of you is here for a purpose. You have dedicated yourself to fight for the light, and we are eternally in your debt..." He trailed off, staring at the entrance to the hall in surprise.

Heads turned and people gasped, which caused more people to turn. Soon the whole hall was staring at the figure in the doorway. Harry stood leaning against the door frame, his entire body glowed with a soft nimbus of light.

"Don't stop on my account, Headmaster. I think it's a really nice speech so far," Harry said with a smirk. "I can't wait to hear if you say anything nice about me."

Dumbledore rushed down the central aisle of the Great Hall with a speed that gave lie to his advanced age. Stopping within a few feet of Harry, he paused, taking in his changed appearance. Then in a totally uncharacteristic move, he grabbed Harry by the shoulders and pulled him into a hug. Harry was surprised for a moment, but he returned the old wizard's embrace.

"I'm back, Albus," he whispered to Dumbledore, then cringed inside. Apparently his stay in Sanctuary had increased his ability to state the painfully obvious.

With a great smile Dumbledore released him and placed a hand on his shoulder. "So I see my boy, so I see!" He then led Harry over to the table where the Weasleys were sitting.

Ginny, being not only the youngest Weasley, but also the shortest, had been unable to see what all the commotion was about because everyone had stood up and started talking. She had missed Harry's words over the noise in the crowd, but she did catch onto the fact that everyone was saying one word over and over again... "Potter".

She stood up and turned around. She took one look and hurled herself into Harry's arms. He grabbed her under each arm and easily lifted her up high before pulling her down into a kiss, and then he gently lowered her to the ground again.

Stepping back slightly, she took in Harry's new appearance. The sleeveless, open front robe exposed his muscular chest and the tattoos on each arm. His hair, now longer, was pulled back and tied off at the back of his neck. She hadn't believed it was possible for Harry to look any more attractive, but he did.

Stepping up to the table, Harry looked at everyone staring at him open mouthed and decided to break the silence. "OY Ron! You're catching flies," he said with a smirk, sitting down at the table. He noticed Hermione's expression mirrored Ron's, including the open jaw.

Ginny sat next to him, her hand holding his like she intended to never let him go. Dumbledore sat down in another empty seat at the table.

Ron closed his mouth but Hermione continued to stare at him. With a shake of his head, Harry reached over and closed her mouth with a finger to her chin.

"H-H-Harry? What did you do to yourself? And where did you get those clothes?" Hermione stammered.

Harry smiled at her as Molly grabbed his plate and started placing food on it. "I think the safest answer is to say that Hogwarts gave them to me, 'Mione," he replied before digging into his dinner.

"You're wearing the battle robes of Gryffindor, Harry," said Dumbledore.

Harry winced and glanced at Dumbledore. "Albus, let's not say that too loudly. We both know there is no link between the Potter line and the Gryffindor line," he mumbled. That was one rumor he did not want to see started.

"While that may be true, I have always stressed that you are his heir, either in blood or in spirit. I think that spirit is probably most accurate. After all, Harry, you embody all of the qualities that Gryffindor prized," Dumbledore replied calmly.

Harry thought about that for a moment before nodding. When he felt a finger running over the phoenix tattoo on his arm, he turned and smiled at Ginny, his eyes sparkling. "You like?" he asked.

"I love the hair, Harry. It's gorgeous!" she replied with a hungry look.

"I have to admit, I'm surprised about the hair myself. I never knew it could grow that long," he said to her.

Hermione narrowed her eyes and stared at him. "Harry," she interrupted, "you've never grown your hair longer than it was before? I don't recall you ever getting any hair cuts while in school."

"I've only had two hair cuts in my life, 'Mione. Both times my hair returned to normal overnight. For all I know, it may be back to normal by tomorrow. I hope not, I sort of like it this way."

"Two hair cuts, Harry? Only two?" Hermione asked dumbfounded.

Harry scowled at her. She didn't know that his only two hair cuts had been by Aunt Petunia and he didn't really want to talk about that time of his life. Hermione blanched under his scowl, realizing that somehow she had touched on a very sensitive topic for him. She reached around Ginny to touch his hand. "Harry, I'm sorry..."

"It's ok, Hermione. Let's just drop the subject, please?" he asked her, the plea evident in his eyes.

Ginny decided to jump in and divert them both. "Harry, you're glowing. You do know that, don't you?" she asked impishly.

Harry grinned at her. "Love, just being near you makes me want to glow," he replied. Ron started making gagging sounds until Hermione hit him in the back of the head.

"How come you never say romantic things like that to me Ron? How come?" she demanded.

"Romantic? Sounds a bit barmy, if you ask me," Ron mumbled under his breath.

"Ron!" Hermione and Molly exclaimed together. As the two women glared at him, he sank a bit lower in his chair and turned his attention to his plate.

Harry and Ginny were oblivious to everything going on around them as they stared at each other. Eventually, the whole table noticed and most started to snicker, Hermione nudged Ginny and she blinked. Turning back to the table, she started to blush when she saw everyone staring at them.

Once dinner was over, Dumbledore coughed politely to attract Harry's attention "I think you would help everyone present here if you would say a few words..." the Headmaster trailed off, watching Harry closely. The old Harry would have hated to talk in public.

Harry looked at Dumbledore and finally nodded in resignation. He started to stand when Ginny grabbed his hand and smiled up at him confidently. He leaned down and kissed her cheek gently before standing and walking to the front of the room.

A hush slowly fell on the crowd as people noticed him standing before them. He looked around, catching his friends and comrades eyes. His smile was confidant, his stance sure.

"Heroes of the Light," he started, his voice carrying throughout the Great Hall without any need to amplify it. "That's a phrase that hasn't been used for more than a thousand years. Back when Hogwarts was new and the four founders worked as one, they created an alliance of the Light to face another Dark Lord. And like today, this Dark Lord killed indiscriminately, muggle, full blood, and muggle born. It didn't matter to KalKahn, as he was called.

"And when Godric Gryffindor had vanquished the Dark Lord, he called together all of his allies, magic folk, magical beings and muggle alike. He called them Heroes of the Light. I stand before you today to tell you that you all are Heroes of the Light. Whether you be healer, fighter, or just bring water to the troops, you are Heroes of the Light. Why? Because you recognize what's right and are willing to put your life on the line to protect countless others who will never know your name or what you do here. But we, here, all of us, will know! Look around you, the person sitting next to you is a hero, worthy of your respect and admiration."

Harry conjured a goblet filled with a lightly spiced wine. Harry raised his goblet to the crowd. "I salute you, Soldiers of the Light! You are the true heroes of our time," he said with conviction.

A stunned silence descended on the hall for a moment. Then slowly, in ones and twos, people stood and hoisted their own glasses in salute until everyone in the hall was on their feet, glasses raised.

Harry returned to his table. He still didn't like speaking in public, but he could live with it. However, he wanted to crawl under the table when Hagrid stood.

"To Harry Potter, Champion of the Light," the huge man bellowed.

He smiled weakly as the cheers reverberated off the stone walls and slunk lower in his chair. The tips of his ears burned brightly with his blush. Both Ginny and Hermione grabbed him by his arms to prevent him from sliding under the table. Some things never changed.

After a few minutes, Harry felt a hand touch his shoulder. Looking up, he saw Amelia Bones smiling down at him. "Harry, would you please do me one favor?" she asked.

"What would that be, Minister?"

"If you ever decide to enter politics, please let me know. We can save the expense of an election if I just hand the job over to you," she said with a laugh. "That speech was marvelous!"

"I don't think you need worry about that, Minister. After this is all over, I'm going to build a big house for Ginny and myself, and then I'm going into hiding. I'll live life as a hermit. It sounds like it might be fun," he replied.

When the laughter subsided, Amelia give his shoulder a squeeze and, with a wave, followed Dumbledore out of the Great Hall.

Fred and George, always unable to let a good joke go, teased Harry about his plan to hide behind Ginny's skirts.

"He's not going to hide behind my skirts," Ginny said primly.

"Thanks, Gin. I knew you would stick up for me!" exclaimed Harry with relief.

"If he wants to hide behind skirts, he has to buy his own. I'm not sharing my clothes with him," she said with a smirk.

The twins and Ron laughed, Hermione and Molly scolded and Arthur tried to hide a grin. Harry stared at Ginny for a moment. Then, with a groan, he took a page from Hermione's book and banged his head on the table a few times.

Eventually, people began to drift out of the Great Hall, but Harry was reluctant to do so. His family was together and that was all that mattered. They sat and talked of simple matters.

By 10 P.M. the Great Hall was half empty. With the Ministry forces in the castle, patrols had been set up, the battlements were manned with a minimal force and people were constantly coming off a shift to get something to eat.

High above the castle, a lone phoenix circled, waiting. When the time was right, it vanished in a flash of flame.

Those in the Great Hall were surprised when a lone phoenix appeared. The large bird circled the hall and, as it did, it sang a song that brought hope to all who heard, save one.

As Harry's family and friends watched the beautiful bird, he stiffened and his nimbus flared. He released Ginny's hand and stood up. Everyone looked back at Harry as the change in the light that surrounded him flared up once more. He walked towards the entrance of the Great Hall without so much as a glance or word to his family.

Ginny followed on his heels, with Ron and Hermione close behind. The other Weasleys looked at each other for a moment before scrambling to their feet and jogging from the hall.

(April Sixth) Hogwarts, Headmaster's office...

Dumbledore sat in his office with Amelia Bones and Kingsley Shacklebolt. They were going over their plans to evacuate those in the castle, should the battle not go well. They were deep into their discussion when Fawkes screamed and launched himself into the air. In a flash of flame, he was gone.

Dumbledore looked up, startled at his friend's behavior. He turned to Amelia to apologize when he was interrupted.

"Dumbledore," said the sorting hat, the mirth evident in its voice. "You and your guests should be in the Room of Requirement. Better get a move on, old boy."

Then the hat broke into song.

Friends and family, both gone and here.
A sword remade this eve you'll see

All are needed, the time is near.

The child of light will set us free.

Dumbledore stood. "Madam Minister, Kingsley, we must hurry. If you would follow me please," he said worriedly. Quickly he led them from his office.

(April Sixth) The Room of Requirement transformed...

Dumbledore led the Minister and Kingsley to the Room of Requirement. Strangely, the door to the room was wide open. He could see a crowd of people coming from several directions, streaming into the room.

Entering the room, he stopped in shock. This wasn't the Room of Requirement. This was the Hogwarts Heart Chamber! Harry stood in front of a Pedestal about five feet high. The nimbus that surrounded him was dazzling to the eye. Around the chamber were flashes of light as phoenixes appeared and then flew to their perches along the walls. Apparently, they knew which was theirs, as they always aimed for one specific perch.

Dumbledore pushed forward in the crowd until he came upon a shield that prevented him from going any further. Turning around, he surveyed the crowd still spilling into the room. As he watched, the room continued to expand to keep pace with the number of people entering. The Weasley's were up front, with Molly trying to keep Ginny from touching the shield.

The crowd gasped and cringed away as a group of spectral shapes walked through the wall closest to the door. Dumbledore swayed with shock as the shades took form. He recognized many of them. Sirius Black, James and Lily Potter, Cedric Diggory, Audrey Kingston, Fabian and Gideon Prewitt, all comrades and people who had given their lives in both wars to defeat Voldemort.

Ginny and Molly both blanched. "Mum is that..."

Molly could only nod, as tears streamed down her face. Both Fabian and Gideon turned and smiled at her. The shade of James Potter looked over at Ginny and winked at her. Ginny smiled back shyly at the spirit of Harry's father. Sirius stood between James and Lily, his arm around both of them. Lily's eyes were full of tears as she stared at her son.

James elbowed Sirius, who turned to look at him. He caught on quickly and looked over at the Weasley's. Spotting Ginny, he smiled and mouthed a silent, "Thank You" to her. Even Lily turned for a moment to smile at her. Ginny felt like she had just passed inspection and her heart soared.

Dumbledore looked back into the Heart Chamber where Harry stood alone. His stance was easy and, as they watched, he extend both arms out in front of his body and turned his hands so his palms were up. Then, crossing both arms, he bent his elbows and laid his hands on his chest, fingertips just below his shoulders, almost as if he were praying.

The perches in the room were full, and the door slowly swung shut. Harry's body stilled and the room grew silent. A moment passed, then another.

Slowly, an indistinct form appeared next to Harry. As the form grew clearer, those in the room realized it was a man. He had a kindly face and intelligent eyes. The man turned to Harry and spoke softly to him, so softly, that no one else could hear his words.

While many wondered who the man was and what he was saying, Dumbledore recognized the specter. It was the old man from Harry's visions.

After speaking to Harry, the old man turned to face the crowd. When he smiled at them, the tension that had been building in the room slowly ebbed away. Dumbledore sensed that this shade was something more than just another ghost. There was a definite sense of presence, an overwhelming feeling of power and love coming from him. He looked Dumbledore in the eye briefly, and then nodded to him.

Dumbledore felt strangely joyous at that nod, as if his entire life had been judged and found acceptable. The old man looked over at Ginny for a long moment, and then smiled at her before he turned his attention back to the entire crowd. Softly he began to speak to the people assembled.

"You are here, assembled in this place, because you are the 'power he knows not'. Remember that, always, for our chosen child relies upon each and every one of you. From the woman who loves him, to the parents who died for him, to the family who adopted him and made him one of their own, your love and support, your devotion and loyalty, sustains and help him. Without you, he is nothing, adrift in a sea of humanity with no anchor. Cherish him, as he cherishes you

"You are here, in this place, to witness and to lend your power and strength to the chosen child. Tonight marks the final phase of the fulfillment of prophecy and you are its instruments!"

In the shocked stillness that followed, the old man faded from view.

Harry raised his head and glanced around the chamber. He never noticed the crowd of people and ghosts watching in hushed silence as he scanned each perch to make sure it was occupied. A low-pitched hum started from the phoenixes. The hum was felt as well as heard by all.

Harry lifted one hand and the sword of Gryffindor appeared in his palm. From the top of the pedestal, a dark, almost black light appeared and it seemed to ascend all the way to the heavens, lost in the dim recesses of the far off ceiling. He backed away from the pedestal and its strange light, as if repelled by it. Those present felt the light and sensed the wrongness about it, as if it had some Dementor-like quality, sucking the happiness from them.

Harry backed further from the pedestal and his face took on an angry, determined cast. This light was an abomination and he intended to do something about it. He hurled the sword at the column of black light. The sword of Gryffindor seemed to move in slow motion. The crowd gasped as the precious weapon flipped end over end in a long, slow arc.

The sword touched the beam and hung suspended, hilt down, rotating slowly. From Harry's hands, two beams of light extended to envelop the sword. The sound coming from the Phoenixes rose in pitch again as the sword burst with a bright blue light. For a moment, it seemed as though the black and blue lights struggled against each other, then the column of light turned bright blue.

As one, the crowd breathed a sigh of relief as the light washed over them. Joy and hope filled them as the sound made by hundreds of phoenixes soothed their fears.

Harry stood for a moment, staring at the sword as it slowly rotating in the column of blue light. His expression was smug, as if he was pleased with the results.

With this new light, it was possible to see the room in its entirety. Dumbledore was awed by the fact that the ceiling still could not be seen. The perches filled with phoenixes seemed to go upwards forever.

The sound from the birds rose again in pitch. A song could now be heard, mixing with the loud, steady hum. The hum, however, made it difficult to hear the new song.

Harry stepped to the side of the pedestal. Placing one hand on the top stone, he held the other hand out in front of the pedestal. Both his hands seemed to burst with bright white light, even brighter than his nimbus.

In front of the pedestal, sparks of light appeared, bright flashes that started about five feet out and rush inward to a center point. Most of the people watching thought they were just sparks, but slowly, an object started to emerge as each spark left a small piece behind.

Dumbledore recognized it first. Harry was creating a new Spirit Crystal! Time passed with the awesome sound of the phoenixes adding their magic to the mix.

Thirty minutes later, a single egg sized stone hovering in front of the pedestal. Several minutes passed as Harry inspected the stone carefully. Then, seeming to gather himself, he started working again.

When more sparks of light appeared, Dumbledore was confused. What could Harry be adding to the stone? He wondered. He watched as Harry slowly built a metal lattice work around the stone, extending it about three inches above the stone into a set of prong-like appendages.

After nearly an hour, a solid metal lattice surrounding the Spirit Stone and Harry moved it into the blue beam of light still bathing the sword. The sword moved up for a moment, as if to make room for stone. When it moved back to its original position, it collided with the pronged assembly above the stone. A bright shower of sparks shot outward and a loud bell tone reverberated throughout the chamber.

As if on cue, every Phoenix in the chamber burst into song and the blue beam of light changed to a dazzling white. The shield holding back the spectators collapsed and the ghosts present faded away with jubilant expressions on their faces.

Harry swayed dangerously and dropped to his knees. He hung his head in exhaustion and Ginny rushed forward. Dropping to her knees in front of him, she held him upright.

Dumbledore strode forward to examine the sword, but he didn't touch it. The beam of light it was floating in could contain other properties. Peering up at the weapon, he could see that Harry had crafted a perfect pommel with the Spirit Stone contained in the base of it.

He then turned to check on Harry. The young man was leaning up against Ginny and his eyes were closed. He wasn't asleep, but he was clearly exhausted. Ginny spoke softly to him and he nodded wearily in response.

Molly strode forward and that seemed to break the paralysis on the rest of the crowd. As one, they also stepped forward to inspect the room.

"Albus," Amelia Bones called as she approached the Headmaster. "What is this room?"

"Normally, this would be the Room of Requirement. Tonight, however, it's Hogwart's Heart Chamber," he replied. Seeing the confusion in her eyes he went on to explain the legend of the chamber and the stone pedestal in the center.

Meanwhile, Bill and Charlie Weasley had decided that, while Ginny might be engaged to Harry, it really wasn't right for him to be snoozing against her chest in public, so they pulled him up by his arms. As he hung limply between them, they realized just how tired he must be. With the Weasley family in tow, they followed Ron and Hermione back to the common room and laid Harry out on a couch. Ginny sat down in time to receive Harry's head in her lap.

The common room was packed and folks were spreading out sleeping bags all over the floor. With so many now in the castle, space was becoming a problem.

Molly conjured sleeping bags for her brood. When she caught Bill and Charlie shooting Ginny funny looks, she rounded on them.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake! You two are worse than your father and I. Yes, your baby sister is engaged to Harry. And yes, I'm sure she's already slept with him on more than one occasion..."

"Mum!" exclaimed Ginny, her face flaming in embarrassment. Ron and Hermione stared at Molly in shock. Hermione secretly prayed that she wasn't going to get herself included in this conversation.

"Hush, Ginny. It's time your brothers understand you're not a baby anymore," Molly said. She then turned to glare at Charlie and Bill as they moved towards Harry.

They recoiled under her gaze. "Harry is part of our family. He'd rather die than hurt Ginny," she said, her tone scathing. "Do you honestly believe your father and I aren't aware of what's going on? Or wouldn't put a stop to it if we didn't approve? Harry has put himself in danger on several occasions to save Ginny's life. If it weren't for Harry, you wouldn't even have a sister."

"She's chosen him and he's chosen her. And after this fight, he's going to marry her. You better get used to that idea. Now, get into a sleeping bag and, if either of you give Harry a hard time, I'll hex you into next year!"

Bill and Charlie managed to look sheepish. Bill scuffed his foot on the carpet looking down.

"I'm sorry, Ginny," mumbled Bill.

"Me too," said Charlie. "I guess you really are grown up now."

Ginny smiled at them. She knew they meant well. They just hadn't had the issue forced in their face so blatantly. Molly's intervention meant that Ginny wouldn't be hexing her brothers tonight. She shot her mum an appreciative glance.

Molly eyed the couch that Ginny and Harry were on and cast a minor Engorgio charm, making it wide enough for Ginny to stretch out next to Harry. Then she conjured up some blankets for them.

Harry cracked one eye open as Ginny repositioned herself on the couch, spooning up behind him. "What's all the shouting about?" he asked sleepily.

Molly leaned over him and smoothed the hair out of his face. "Nothing, dear. Go back to sleep," she replied, but Harry had already dropped off.

(April Sixth) Somewhere in England, Location Unknown...

Voldemort sat in his chambers, going over a map of Hogsmeade and Hogwarts. He looked up as Wormtail entered the room carrying a large sheath of parchments.

"Report," said Voldemort.

Wormtail bowed lowed. "It seems we've had some success in confusing the Ministry and the Order as to our numbers. But they've managed to bring additional forces into the castle. I suspect they know of the attack." He paused for a moment, dreading the next part of his report. "Also, it seems that the hit wizard hired to kill Potter failed and was captured," he concluded, flinching while waiting for the expected blow or curse. Surprisingly it never came. Glancing up from his parchments he saw Voldemort waving dismissively over the last piece of information.

"No matter, Wormtail. I didn't really expect it to succeed. What of our numbers, and theirs?" Voldemort asked in a deceptively calm voice.

"Our best estimate is they'll have less than a thousand defending the castle, my Lord. As to our numbers, we managed to feed information to the Order to make them think our force will be a third of what we really have. Additionally, I'm sure you'll be pleased to note that our forces in France have fully assembled and are awaiting the order to move. In fact, all forces are awaiting your order, my Lord."

"Yes," Voldemort whispered, his eyes glowing in the gloomy chamber. "Tomorrow night, we shall dine at Hogwarts! Send the signal to stand by, Wormtail," he snapped.

He watched for a moment as the little man scurried from the room before turning to Nagini.

"Tomorrow, my pet," he said in parseltongue. "You will have much fresh meat to chose from."

The huge snake uncoiled itself from behind Voldemort's throne and bobbed its massive head in response. "Much thanks, my Master," the snake replied.

(April Seventh) Dawn, Town of Hogsmeade...

Dawn broke over Hogsmeade. The sleepy little village was just starting to awake up when a loud siren broke the morning silence. People scrambled from their beds and quickly threw on clothing and gathered up their children.

The Ministry had quietly alerted the town that it would have to be fully evacuated today. Some wondered if this was some sort of test, others knew better. People started leaving their homes as teams of Aurors swept the small village to find those who needed help moving to the center of town. Of the over fifteen hundred people in Hogsmeade, only a hundred elected to stay and help up at the school. Slowly, in groups of ten, the rest were portkeyed to a Ministry relocation center in southern England.

By 8 A.M. Hogsmeade was deserted. A few Aurors made another sweep of the town and then, they too were gone.

Dawn, Hogwarts Common Room...

Ginny awoke to find the place next to her empty. She sat up sleepily and looked around. Most people were still asleep at this early hour. She spotted Harry as he came down the stairway from his dorm. He had gone to take a shower. He was still dressed in the same outfit he wore yesterday and his glow had finally subsided. He smiled, spotting her awake. Ginny climbed out of the couch and stepped carefully around the sleeping people to make her way towards him.

"Good Morning, love," he said in a hushed tone. "The goblin contingent will be here soon and there are people coming up from Hogsmeade. I want to be able to greet them as they arrive. You have time to get cleaned up if you want. I'd suggest wearing something you're comfortable in today. Forget the school robes."

"You'll wait for me?" she asked.

"Always," he said simply.

Fifteen minutes later she was showered, dressed in her Phoenix Brigade dress uniform from last year, and walking back down the stairs from her dorm. Harry gulped nervously. It had been a year since she'd worn the uniform and it still had the same impact on him. In fact, its impact was actually worse than last year. Ginny had added another inch to her height and had rounded even more in such wonderful places.

She smiled impishly at him before making her way over to where he was standing. She knew exactly what her uniform did to him.

Harry jumped when a hand landed on his shoulder. He spun to see Ron, also dressed in his uniform.

"Did you order everyone to wear their uniforms, mate?" asked Harry.

Ron straightened his uniform, looking a bit sheepish. "Well, it seemed like a good idea."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "Maybe you're right. I'd put on my uniform robe, but I don't think I'm supposed to."

"I like you in your dress uniform Harry, but that outfit is really fantastic," Ginny said, eying his long hair, the open front of his robe and the tattoos.

"Mate, you better marry her quick. I don't think she'll wait much longer," Ron said, chuckling at Harry.

"Oh? And what about you and 'Mione?" Harry retorted.

"What about Ron and I?" asked a perplexed Hermione as she walked up to join them. Ron was turning six shades of red and starting to sputter.

"Oh, Ron will explain 'Mione. And Ron, don't forget to wake up the Brigade. Somehow I doubt they'll want to sleep in today. Come on Gin, we have some visitors to greet," Harry said, linking his arm with Ginny's and walking away, leaving a confused Hermione and a stammering Ron behind.

Near the Main Gates of Hogwarts...

Harry and Ginny stood silently as they watched a line of people trudging up the road to the main gate. As they neared it, they spotted Harry in his splendid robes waiting for them with a smile on his face. Each person would later recall that they felt as if Harry had personally smiled to welcome them alone. Heartened by the sight of him, they walked tall and proud into the castle where others would direct them to where they could be most useful.

Twenty minutes later, the Goblin brigade arrived outside of the apparition wards of Hogwarts. Goblins had their own form of wandless magic, but when they fought, they often used weapons as well. They quickly formed up into columns and marched into the castle. One lone goblin approached Ginny and Harry. Spotting the approaching Goblin Harry took a step forward and placed his hand over his heart.

"Tarmac, I greet thee in the name of the Ministry of Magic. May your enemies shatter themselves upon your blade," he said, giving the ritualistic greeting for a goblin warrior.

Tarmac looked surprised for a moment, then repeated the gesture. "Harry Potter, I greet thee in the name of the Goblin Nation. May your enemies shatter themselves upon your blade," he replied.

Tarmac looked curiously over at Ginny.

"One of my commanders Tarmac, and my chosen mate, Ginevra Weasley," Harry said, answering the unspoken question.

"Ginevra Weasley, I greet thee in the name of the Goblin Nation. May your enemies shatter themselves upon your blade," Tarmac said bowing low.

Ginny bobbed her head in acknowledgement. According to goblin protocol, a female did not have to provide the formal response to the greeting.

Tarmac eyed her for a moment longer before turning back to Harry. "There is steel and fire in your chosen mate, Harry Potter. I do not envy you trying to tame her," he said smiling toothlessly.

Harry and Remus had run several lectures explaining Goblins to the Phoenix Brigade, so Ginny knew he wasn't trying to insult her. Despite that knowledge, she felt herself becoming angry but Harry interrupted her train of thought by laughing.

"Perhaps Tarmac, but somehow I suspect she'll be the one taming me, not the other way around. Come, let us go inside and meet some of the other commanders," Harry urged.

As they left the vicinity of the gate, the two massive halves swung shut and several cross beams dropped into place.

Somewhere in England, Location Unknown...

Voldemort stood silently as two of his servants approached. The first man bowed low, and then carefully helped him out of his black robe. Once the robe was removed, the second man bowed and approached, carrying a crimson robe. The men then moved to stand beside the Dark Lord. Turning, they faced him, bowed once more, and then helped him don the new robe.

With the robe in place, the two men stepped back and a third appeared, carrying his wand and holster on a silver tray. Voldemort thrust his right arm out.

The first man carefully pushed back the sleeve of his master's robe while the second removed the holster from the tray and fastened it to Voldemort's arm with trembling fingers.

Nagini prowled the room restlessly while he watched his master prepare.

"Patience my pet," Voldemort crooned to the giant snake as he picked up his wand and holstered it. "We are nearly ready."

Voldemort turned to see Wormtail enter the room and bow low before him.

"All is as you have commanded, my Lord. Your guard is assembled and waiting your presence," the animagus said.

"Excellent! Most Excellent! Come Wormtail, let us to greet my guard," Voldemort replied gleefully as servant rushed up and placed a hooded crimson cape around his shoulders.

Molly and Serena...

Serena was talking to her husband in the Great Hall when she noticed Molly Weasley walking towards her with a determined look in her eye.

Serena smiled up at her husband and patted him fondly on the cheek, which she knew would annoy him. He was still upset with her for last night's fight. He had wanted her to leave the castle and she had refused. Patting him on the cheek that way would cause him to leave long enough for her to deal with Molly.

Severus nodded curtly to Molly Weasley as he brushed past her. Serena smiled at the older woman in welcome. Having spent considerable time with some of her children in the past two years, she had grown to respect Molly greatly.

"Molly. So nice to see you again,"

"And you, Serena, although I do wish it were under better circumstances. I spoke this morning with Madam Pomfrey and she suggested I speak to you. She seemed to think that you would have use for me here in the hall, rather than up in the infirmary."

Serena frowned for a moment. "Molly, have you any medical training? Both the Hall and Infirmary are being set up as hospitals."

"I am a fully accredited matron, Serena, and I have had all the basic medi-witch classes. Just because I put my career on hold to raise my family doesn't mean I've forgotten what I've learned."

Serena smiled. A matron was like a muggle mid-wife, which meant she'd certainly not be squeamish around blood, and the basic medi-witch training would certainly be a big help.

"Excellent, Molly. The first thing I'll need for you to do is help me organize the fourth year volunteers. They'll be bringing up supplies from the dungeons, as well as helping bring in wounded. Do you think you could take charge of them? That would be one less thing I have to worry about. Once the wounded start coming in, we'll need you here. Until then, you can have them move up the potions and blankets we've stored in the stockroom next to the potions lab."

Molly nodded eagerly. She knew she wasn't much of a fighter, but her organizational skills were legendary and her background as a matron would help with the wounded.

With Molly sent off to organize the Great Hall, Serena turned to look at what she had next to do. Her eye's narrowed when she noticed Wan Chang setting up beds. Then she recalled how Harry had healed her. Shaking her head, she went about her next task for what was sure to be a long day.

Hogsmeade (mid morning)...

Less than a mile south of the little town was a field that had once been used for farming. Now the field was being used as a staging point. Normally, a portkey travel didn't make any noise. Today however, hundreds of people were arriving via portkey, and it sounded as if the air was being torn apart.

Voldemort and his guard arrived shortly after the first wave of his army. Army, of course, was a loosely applied term. It was more like a mob than an army. It took all of Voldemort's power to hold them in check at the staging point using the protean charm. Wormtail had wisely sent a few select Death Eaters ahead with orders to scout out Hogsmeade. It was a daring order on Wormtail's part, but upon hearing about it, Voldemort readily agreed it was a smart move. Besides, the first wave had only arrived at the staging point and there were two more waves awaiting orders to begin their own transport.

Hogwarts (late morning)...

Molly had the house elves set aside a small portion of the Great Hall with some tables for people to use. Another set of tables was set up with food, buffet style, so people could get what they wanted.

Harry was looking over the buffet with Ginny and the rest of his friends when he suddenly stiffened. Ginny looked at him worriedly. His eyes were unfocused, almost as if he was listening to something.

A moment later, he snapped back into focus and faced Ron. "Get everyone in position. I figure we have an hour before he'll be here," he said.

When Ron nodded, Harry put his plate down and trotted from the room.

Ron cast a quick spell and a loud two-toned bell sounded throughout the castle. With a nod to the others, then turned as one and raced after Harry. As he did, the Phoenix Brigade and Ministry forces scrambled to their own assigned positions.

Hogwarts Astronomy tower (late morning)...

They followed Harry to the top of the Astronomy tower. There, they found him staring towards Hogsmeade. A low cloud of black smoke rose over the horizon.

Hogsmeade was burning.

Below them they could hear the sound of shouted orders as the Phoenix Brigade and the Ministry forces took up position on the battlements.

Harry turned to Ron and the others. "Join up with the Brigade, Ron. You know what to do and you can't do it from up here," he said tensely.

Ron looked torn. This was his best mate, his brother, and he didn't want to leave him. He grabbed Harry in a hug. "I just got used to you as a brother, Harry. You better not do anything stupid, mate," he said, trying to fight back tears.

"One way or another, it ends today, Ron. But I won't do anything stupid. Take care of 'Mione and Ginny for me, will you?"

Ron nodded shakily. Releasing him, he turned away, feeling like he may never see his best friend again.

As Ron stopped by the stairs, Severus, Amelia and Dumbledore arrived. Seeing Harry, Hermione and Ginny, they decided to give them a few minutes of privacy.

Hermione moved to Harry and crushed herself against him. She was too emotional to say anything. Stepping back slightly, she stared into his eyes, trying to convey her thoughts and feelings to him without uttering a word. When he smiled gently and touched her cheek, she closed her eyes and nodded. Letting him go, she stepped back, glanced at Ginny briefly, and then joined Ron by the stairs.

Harry turned to Ginny, his heart in his eyes. "Gin, I want you to know you are an extraordinary woman. I love you more than I can ever say. If anything should hap..."

"Don't you say it Harry Potter," she exclaimed hotly, shaking a finger under his nose. "Don't you think it and don't you say it, damn you! You're coming back. Do you hear me? You better come back to me!"

She broke into tears, finally giving in to the emotions and fear she had been trying to deny. Harry held her trembling body against his. Damn the fates! He thought. I don't want to do this! Why can't I have a normal life?

He pulled away from Ginny far enough to gaze into her eyes, memorizing her features, imprinting them on his soul. When she started to speak, he placed a finger over her lips and shook his head.

After wiping the tears from her cheeks, he brushed his lips over hers softly, then released her and stepped back, glancing at Ron.

Understanding the plea, Ron walked over to take his sister in his arms and lead her down the tower. Once the three of them left, Severus and the others came through the entrance.

"There's more than we thought, a lot more," Harry murmured, as Severus joined him. Turning to stare at the town, they watched the advancing black wave that seemed to cover the countryside. Amelia gasped when she saw the size of the army they faced.

Hogwarts Gate wall(mid morning)...

The Phoenix Brigade and Hogsmeade irregulars manned the battlements containing the main gate. Ron, Ginny and Hermione had shown up shortly after everyone had taken their positions.

Ron looked at his brothers, who had joined him on the battlements, and told Fred and George to activate their quagmire traps. The twins quickly activated the charms, and then signaled for the release of the Grapes of Wrath into the Dark Forest.

The people on the battlements couldn't yet see the oncoming Death Eaters, but they knew they were coming. Ron glanced to the inner courtyard where the goblins were setting up. It had been decided this morning to put them in a position to defend the gates in case of a break in. The goblin tendency to mix magic and weapons made them ideal for close in fighting.

Overhead, the sky was filling with phoenixes, coming up from the Heart Chamber where they had rested last night. Their song strengthened and gave hope to all the defenders.

Charlie, Bill, Percy and Arthur nodded to Ron as they took up positions near a crenel. Nearby, two of the grenadier squads had split up to man the four cannon on the wall. A majority of the munitions they had available were simple exploding munitions. Each cannon had roughly twenty 'special' munitions made by the Weasley twins.

Recovered from their farewell with Harry, Ginny and Hermione moved along the battlements, checking positions and calming people who were getting nervous. Jack Parsons watched from the court yard behind the Goblin position. He had a group of forth year students standing by to run orders for him.

Along the Approach Road to Hogwarts...

The castle sat dark and silent in the distance as the first legion of Death Eaters moved up the road. The plan they'd been handed was a simple one. Force their way into the castle, kill everyone; leave no survivors.

As a group, they stopped roughly a quarter mile from the castle and stood silently for a moment. Behind them, still in the town, were two more legions. At some unseen signal more than a thousand Death Eaters surged forward.

(April Seventh) Atop the Astronomy tower...

Harry watched impassively as the first wave of Death Eaters let loose a yell and charged the castle. Once they had reached a certain point, the cannons barked and large puffs of smoke bellowing from the barrels. The explosions among the ranks of the oncoming army easily took out twenty or more Death Eaters at a time.

Harry wanted to be down with Ron and his family, but he knew he couldn't. This was what Ron had been trained for. In this fight, he had only one job to do and all he could do was watch until his time came.

The cannons barked again and again, the smoke obscuring the gate wall from Harry's view. He could see Death Eaters falling as the cannon rounds exploded among them. Every so often, special munitions were used. Strangler nets and cluster shots mowed down larger numbers of opposing troops or trapped them in an ever-constricting net.

Hogwarts Gate wall...

Ron watched the cannon fire for a moment, and then he decided it was time to get in and mix it up.

"SHIELDS!" Ron bellowed.

All along the battlements, shields sprang up as the shielders cast their spells. As the order was echoed along the wall, the castle battlements were ringed with the powerful, humming shields that were so effective last year.

Unlike last year however, there was no possibility of rotating shields. Now, shielders had to drop their shields before another could take their place. As the oncoming horde came into range, spells began to arc back and forth between the defenders and the attackers.

Ron steeled himself as he saw the attackers were now arcing explosive spells over the shields and people were being injured.

As the attackers came closer, the grenadiers started hurling the Weasley Grenades. Explosions tore through the attackers, but they were managing to do damage none the less. Ron winced when a freak hit of an explosive spell vaporized a grenadier and her entire supply of grenades near the eastern section of the wall. A shield collapsed and a cannon fell silent, damaged beyond repair.

Jack Parsons, seeing the explosion, turned to Alastor. "Al, get a squad from Hotel company up there to plug that hole."

Alastor nodded and turned to issue the command to a runner.

On the wall, fourth year students were grabbing wounded and portkeying to the Great Hall.

(April Seventh) The Great Hall...

Molly sat apprehensively as the castle shook from the sound of cannon fire and explosions. Now, all she could do was wait and pray along with the others in the hall. That changed a moment later when there came a shout as wounded started coming in, sometimes under his or her own power, sometimes via portkey by a student or other volunteer.

Molly rushed over to one student who'd just arrived. These were no simple hexes being used. People were being maimed and killed. The student's Phoenix Brigade uniform was torn and bloody. There was a gaping wound in his belly and the skin around the wound looked to have been badly burned. Molly administered a pain-relieving potion via an injection, and then called for a healer. This required more skill than she had.

A healer rushed up to examine the injured student. A minute later, he looked at Molly and shook his head in despair. Some injuries were just not healable.

(April Seventh) Atop the Astronomy tower (Noon)...

Harry's eyes narrowed when he saw the explosion along the eastern end of the gate wall. He barely shifted a foot in anticipation of moving when a hand stopped him. Dumbledore looked him in the eye.

"This isn't your time yet, Harry," he said over the din of the fight below them. They both cringed as a large explosion tore through one section of the castle. As they watched, the divination tower teetered and slowly collapsed in upon itself. The Death Eaters were now working together, using explosive spells to assault the castle.

Harry's anger flared and his body exploded with a nimbus of bright white light. He rushed to the parapet and leaned over to examine the damage to the castle. As he touched the wall, his hands flared. There was a sound like the ringing of a bell and the sword of Gryffindor appeared. His hand shot out and snapped up the sword before it could begin to fall. He leaned the sword against the ledge and stepped back.

A moment later, a runner bolted out of the stairway and to the Headmaster's side. Delivering his message, he turned and sprinted back down the stairs.

Dumbledore turned to Harry. "We must leave now. They need us below," he said softly his own eyes filled with pain.

Harry hung his head. He knew it would eventually come to this and that he'd be alone. "I know, Albus. Merlin protect you my friend," he replied.

Dumbledore placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "I know we haven't always seen eye to eye, but I want you to know you've been like a grandson to me. I'm very proud of you, my boy."

Harry looked up and nodded with a small smile before turning back to survey the battle unfolding below him. In the distance, he could see a force moving towards them that was at least double what they already faced. He stood resolutely, watching them approach and never noticed Dumbledore, Amelia and Severus leave.

His time was fast approaching.

The Great Hall...

Molly was treating a man who had a bad cut on his leg when a scream tore through the castle. She looked up in time to see several Death Eaters rush into the room. Her eyes widened when they began to cast the killing curses on the wounded. She ducked as one curse came close to her.

Serena whipped her head around when screaming started. Seeing the Death Eaters, she pulled out her wand. Before it cleared the holster, she knew it was too late. She watched, detached and a little curious, as the sickly green light of the killing curse hurtled towards her.

"NO!" a voice screamed.

A shape dodged in front of Serena. Her paralysis was broken by the screams of the lesser injured as they fought back against their assailants and she lost track of the curse that had been aimed at her.

Without thinking, she sent a Reductor curse at the man who'd tried to kill her. Unfortunately for him, so did several other students. The Death Eater literally exploded in a shower of bone, blood and tissue.

Molly grabbed a fourth year student. "Find Alastor Moody and tell him we have Death Eaters in the castle. GO!" As the student tore from the hall, Molly turned and spotted Serena sinking to her knees.

Serena turned over the body of the girl who had taken a killing curse to save a teacher who didn't trust her. Staring into Wan Chang's dead, sightless eyes, she started to sob. Gathering the girl's body in her arms, she rocked back and forth, unable to think beyond her grief.

She had no idea how long she rocked Wan's body. When someone started to shake her, she looked up, uncomprehendingly. The stinging slaps delivered to each cheek focused her attention and she stared into the concerned eyes of Molly Weasley.

"I know it hurts, Serena, but you must get up now. We'll have time to grieve later. Right now, we have more wounded coming in. You can't help this girl, but you can help others." As she spoke, Molly pried the younger woman's hands away from the dead girl and helped her to stand. "Serena? Are you listening? We have wounded that must be seen to. Do you understand?"

"I...yes, I understand," Serena said raggedly.

With a final look at the dead girl at her feet, Serena turned her attention to the new arrivals.

The courtyard...

"Mister Moody!" shouted the forth year student. "We've had an attack inside the Great Hall!"

Moody and Jack exchanged a glance. "Blaise's security team must have been overwhelmed guarding the Honeydukes tunnel. You boy," snapped Jack. "Find McPherson in Golf Company and tell him I want them to reinforce Blaise in the northern courtyard. Tell him there may be fighting going on when he gets there. Move!"

Turning to another runner, he snapped out an order to pull two Ministry companies off of the northern wall, as it had yet to see action.

A hollow booming sound echoed off the castle walls and Jack whipped his head around in time to see the inner gates bulge inward, ominously. "Alastor, we're going to need help. The gates aren't going to hold. Let's start pulling companies off the walls that are clear."

Along the Approach Road to Hogwarts...

Voldemort's first legion was down to half strength, but they had managed to do a fair amount of damage. When the second and third legions finally linked up with them, their numbers swelled to over twenty five hundred attacking Death Eaters.

In a stroke of fate or luck, hundreds of Death Eaters started firing heavy bludgeoning spells at the gates. The gates were warded and shielded, but no amount of wards or shields could withstand the onslaught. Inexorably, the massive iron gates bent inwards under the assault.

Hogwarts Gate Wall...

"SWITCH SHIELDS!" bellowed Ron. He didn't want to issue that command, but with the increase of attackers, the shields were failing fast. The shields were dropped for only a moment, but that's all it took as dozens of Hogsmeade irregulars and Phoenix Brigade members took injuries before the new shields could be put in place.

Ron spotted Percy fall. He clenched his teeth and tried to ignore him. A moment later a student ran up to Percy and portkeyed him to the infirmary. Hermione took a hit to the leg and was limping badly, but she was still fighting. Luna had been evacuated much earlier when they suffered the freak grenade explosion.

Ron was surprised to see the Headmaster, Professor Snape and Amelia Bones join him on the battlements. Severus nodded to the Headmaster and immediately took up an empty position along the wall.

With a large booming sound, the gates of Hogwarts crashed inwards.

An explosion knocked Ron off his feet. He stood up groggily and looked about him as others climbed back to their feet. Severus Snape however, didn't rise.

Ron frowned as a volunteer rushed to Snape in a crouch and slapped a portkey on him. The pair vanished as additional Ministry companies arrived and took up empty spots in the line.

Atop the Astronomy Tower...

Harry couldn't stand waiting anymore. He transformed into Wings and sprang aloft. A moment later, Fawkes swooped down and grabbed the sword. Wings started to circle, gaining altitude. I must put an end to this, he thought.

The Courtyard...

When the gates came crashing down, the Goblins sprang into action. They rushed the Death Eaters streaming into the gates, swinging axes and casting their own, rather nasty version of the cutting hex.

The goblins pushed back the Death Eaters, holding them long enough for Professors Flitwick and McGonagall to conjure several large boulders to block the opening. But it wasn't a perfect wall they had conjured, there were gaps. And it was through one of these gaps that Professor Flitwick was brought down with a killing curse.

Another explosive hex hit near McGonagall, throwing her back against the castle wall.

Hogwarts Gate Wall...

"LOOK!" someone shouted. Ron spun around and reeled with pain as he watched the Astronomy tower heel hard to the right and come crashing down, burying one section of the western wall and its defenders under tons of rubble.

"HARRY!" Ginny shouted and started to run to the scene, but Dumbledore grabbed her. He looked into her eyes, his expression grim. "If this be the end of the light Ginevra, then fight! Take as many with you as you can, for Harry."

She wiped angrily at her tears and nodded to the old wizard. Grinding her teeth, letting her anger rage, she turned back to the wall. Picking her target, she cast a new bat bogey hex she had devised with Hermione's help. Her hapless victim staggered as a bat started to climb out of his nostril. The bat got about halfway out and exploded. The headless corpse slumped to the ground.

"OY! That's showing them, Ginny," shouted Bill with a feral grin. Ginny's lips pulled back in a snarl as she took out another Death Eater.

Harry Meets Voldemort...

Wings circled high above the castle, watching the battle below. It had settled into a grinding affair with the defenders holding on, but only barely. He scanned the battlefield for Voldemort. If he could find him, he could end this now, one way or the other.

The sharp phoenix vision didn't help him spot Voldemort among the attackers. Where was he? Looking further out, two hundred yards away from the battle, he spotted a small group of Death Eaters clustered around a figure in a red robe.

Wings winced inwardly. There had to be thirty Death Eaters guarding Voldemort! He screamed and folded his wings to dive upon his enemy, never noticing that a group of nearly a hundred phoenixes from those circling the castle had joined him. The remaining birds broke from their circle and dove on the Death Eaters attacking the castle.

Caught by surprise, Voldemort flinched and ducked as he and his honor guard were suddenly attacked by phoenixes. More than twenty-five phoenixes attacked Nagini, tearing at the massive snake. Wings landed and transformed.

Harry whipped out his wand and, before Voldemort could react, Harry got off two spells in quick succession.

"Morbus Virga," he shouted, aiming for Voldemort. Nothing visible happened and Harry quickly sent a wandless bludgeoning spell at Voldemort's shoulder.

The phoenixes attacking Nagini retreated to a higher formation above the scene. Nagini lay trashing in his death throes not ten yards away.

Voldemort spun and screamed as the powerful bludgeoning spell hit his shoulder before he could erect a shield. His arm hung loosely to one side, badly broken.

Voldemort growled and thrust out his wand. "Avada Kedavra!" he shouted. With a loud popping sound, a flash of light erupted from his wand, followed by a dribble of turnips. Voldemort looked surprised at this bizarre turn of events.

Harry calmly re-holstered his wand. "Hello, Tom. I'm pleased you could join us today," he said in a conversational tone.

"POTTER!" spat Voldemort. "NEVER CALL ME BY THAT NAME!"

"But it's your name, Tom. You know, all this noise about blood is really quite silly. I don't know why you bother, especially when you're not a pure blood."

"FOOL! I AM SLYTHERIN'S HEIR! I WILL COMPLETE HIS GREAT WORK!"

Harry cocked his head and stared at the Dark Lord with an expression of disgust. "You know, I'm not sure why everyone is so afraid of you. You're nothing more than a lost little boy. You're impulsive, petty and not very smart. Hell, you're not even human anymore, are you? Slytherin himself would recoil from what you've become. His heir, you say? Slytherin would have spat upon a half-blood like you."

When Voldemort snarled at him, Harry raised a hand and murmured, "Spensa circumvenio judico."

The dome of a judgment shield sprang up around Harry and Voldemort. The golden dome was crisscrossed with silver lines and hummed loudly around them, muting the sounds of battle in the distance. Voldemort's eye's widened at Harry's display of wandless magic.

The phoenixes that had been attacking Voldemort's honor guard lifted away from those Death Eaters, freeing them from attack. They all turned in confusion to see their Lord within the strange shield. Several of his followers attempted to run through the shield only to be vaporized.

"KILL HIM, MY SERVANTS!" Voldemort shouted over the hum of the shield.

Harry looked at his nails and buffed them against his robe while the Death Eaters turned and started hurling curses at him. Or at least, they thought they were hurling curses. Some wands exploded, others shot out water, butterflies and peanuts. Harry's use of the Wand Virus had nullified every wand around him, including Voldemort's and his own.

"It's just you and I, Tom, as it was meant to be," Harry said calmly.

"So you've learned a few tricks have you, Potter? In the end it won't matter. I will still kill you!" Voldemort retorted.

Voldemort growled and thrust out his wand. "Avada Kedavra!" he shouted. His wand turned red hot and started making snapping noises. Hissing in pain, he dropped it. Harry rolled his eyes at the Dark Lord's stupidity. The wand continued to glow as it fell to the ground, where it turned white hot and burned to ash.

"Maxime flamma comburo," Voldemort hissed, thrusting out his good hand. His hand flared briefly with a red glow. A wash of flame issued from Voldemort's palm, hitting Harry before he could react. Harry dived and conjured water to put out the flames that were searing his arm and leg. Continuing his roll, he fired back with a cutting hex which Voldemort deflected using a shield.

The pair traded spells at a blur. The dome began to glow and ring like a bell as deflected spells struck the judgment shield and were absorbed. The noise from the one on one duel was enough to stop everyone, even the fight up at the castle, as the titanic struggle within the dome took place. No one could see what was going on within the dome, but everyone knew. This was the battle; this would decide the outcome of the war.

Hogwarts Gate Wall...

A strange silence descended upon the battlefield as everyone turned to watch the fight now taking place within the golden dome. Ginny rode an emotional roller coaster of relief and terror. Harry had survived the destruction of the Astronomy tower, but now faced Voldemort himself.

Dumbledore strode up to a crenel and watched as the judgment shield shimmered and rang like a bell, absorbing deflected spells. This was ancient light magic, beyond anything he had ever known.

Hundreds of phoenixes circled above the dome, singing a song that lent strength to the dome and hope to the defenders. The seconds passed like years, the minutes like eons, as both friend and foe alike watched and waited. The only real motion came from those volunteers still collecting wounded and a few smart Death Eaters who decided now was the time to leave the field of battle.

After what seemed like an eternity, everyone on the field gasped when the shield wavered and collapsed.

The Great Hall...

Serena and Molly stood close to each other in the hall, their minds numb. They had been keeping up, but the St. Mungos healers had pushed them aside after seeing their reaction to Percy and Severus being brought in.

A few minutes later, Blaise was brought in being carried by two members of his security team. All three were wounded, Blaise severely, his legs crushed. Molly dragged Serena over to Blaise and his men to help. They would have to trust the St. Mungos healers to deal with Percy and Severus.

Harry and Voldemort...

Adrenalin fed and kept Harry going. He had been hit many times, some of them quite badly, but so had Voldemort. Both men were weakening and they knew it. Voldemort was limping from a large, slashing wound on his leg. Harry had a similar cut slicing down his back, narrowly missing his spine. Harry had hit Voldemort with a drilling hex, piercing his chest and lung and greenish tinged blood dribbled from the corner Voldemort's mouth. Voldemort retaliated with a burning hex that caused Harry's burned side to bubble and crisp.

After many minutes of combat, Voldemort dodged another curse from Harry and hit him with a bludgeoning spell, which knocked Harry to his back. Spots danced before his eyes as he gasped for air from lungs surrounded by broken ribs. The judgment shield wavered and collapsed.

Voldemort limped over to the supine Harry. "So Potter, it ends here and now."

A piercing scream rent the air as a dozen phoenixes appeared above. One dove down on the two wizards carrying a long silvery object. Fawkes dropped the Sword of Gryffindor which landed neatly in Harry's outstretched hand. Harry sat up and plunged the sword into the breast of Voldemort.

Voldemort looked down at Harry and the sword in his chest in shock, then he started to laugh. "Foolish boy! I am immortal! Do you really think you can kill me with some silly sword?" he sneered and raised a hand to cast a final killing curse at Harry.

Voldemort froze. His brows knitted together in confusion. The Essence Stone in the sword's pommel started to glow brightly. The glow slid up the sword and encompassed Voldemort. Harry poured all of his magic into the sword, amplifying its effect and the glow. He drew power from nearby Hogwarts to throw into the effort, his body bursting into a corona of blazing white light.

Voldemort screamed. It was a pitiful wail that seemed to drift out over the battlefield. As he did, the Dark Mark on his arm, burned into his flesh and burst into a white-hot flame.

Harry pushed the sword even deeper into Voldemort's chest and watched through the blinding glare as the Dark Lord's robes caught fire. All around the battlefield, Death Eaters dropped to the ground and writhed as their own Marks consumed them.

Voldemort began to shrivel as the Essence Stone sucked his soul into its confined space. A loud, explosive sound rocked the surrounding area and Harry was hurled backwards by the wave of pressure.

The explosion blasted outwards, knocking the Hogwarts defenders from their feet. It seemed like a huge black wave had passed over them. Every exposed window in the castle shattered. Hagrid's hut tilted crazily and collapsed from the shockwave.

Slowly, painfully, Harry climbed to his feet, still holding the sword. Barely able to stand, he staggered over to where Voldemort lay in the dirt. His shriveled body once again the corpse it would have been after eighteen years of death.

Harry looked over his shoulder with longing at Hogwarts. With a soft pop, he vanished from sight.

On the Battlements...

Dumbledore climbed to his feet and stared for a moment at the sight of Harry standing over his foe. When the young man vanished from sight, he quickly turned to Amelia, who had been fighting by his side. This had been something they discussed secretly. He knew where Harry was heading.

"Minister, we must go to the Ministry now," he urged.

Amelia's eyes widened and she nodded. The two of them vanished from the battlements with loud pops.

Not far away, a small, red headed woman fell to her knees, sobbing. "HARRY!" she screamed.

Dumbledore and Amelia arrived at the Ministry a moment later. Alarms were screaming throughout the building, warning that someone had apparated through the wards. Amelia followed Dumbledore as he headed straight for the Department of Mysteries. Ignoring her questions, he ran to the Death Chamber.

Entering the Chamber, they skidded to a halt. Harry stood, glowing, as the sword floated gently in front of the Veil. With a deft motion of one hand, Harry split the sword from the pommel. He moved the sword away from the Veil and let it gently fall to the ground.

With the sword safe, he turned to the pommel, still floating in front of the Veil, and moved it forward. When the pommel touched the Veil it seemed to stretch and fight against the pull of the other world.

The pommel fought with the Veil for several moments, as if to prevent it from passing through. Then, with a loud tearing sound, the pommel shot through the Veil and out of sight. Voldemort's soul was now safely beyond the reach of Man.

Harry approached the Veil and his magic flared. He gripped the frame that held the Veil and slowly it changed. The wooden frame became marble and the torn and tattered curtain stopped moving as it, too, changed into marble.

The gateway had been sealed forever.

Harry staggered as he stepped back from the gateway and his glowing nimbus vanished. He stood swaying, his eyes closed. Dumbledore and Amelia ran down the steps as he collapsed.

Rushing to him, they gasped at his injuries. Dumbledore gently turned him over and checked his pulse. It was faint and irregular, but still there.

Harry cracked one eye open and looked up at his Headmaster. "It's finished... Albus... take me home... I want... to die among... family...", he whispered and then he went limp.

Chapter 15 - Farewell to the Boy-Who-Lived

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...

Ron slumped weakly against the wall. Bill was holding a sobbing Ginny. Hermione sat down heavily, her injured leg stretched out in front of her. With the death of Voldemort, his forces suffered massive injuries as

each Dark Mark caught fire and burned. In many cases, Death Eaters died as their robes caught on fire. A few survived, having been able to put out the flames in time.

Even now, Ministry Defense Forces were fanning out in front of the gates, collecting wands, weapons and other objects. Little was being done to comfort the injured Death Eaters. Mostly, those few that had survived were bound and left there for Ministry Aurors to collect.

Ron watched Jack Parsons trudge over. He had a nasty cut on his forehead and it looked like his closely cropped hair had been singed away in places.

"Ron," he said tiredly. "We're all done here today. See to the wounded and get everyone else into a bed for some well-earned rest. Damn, I thought we were going to get reamed royally when that second wave showed up." He pulled a flask out of his pocket and took a swig. Looking at Ron, he held out the flask.

Ron took a swallow from the flask and his eyes crossed for a moment. He shook his head as the fog and fatigue cleared from his brain. "Merlin! What was that?" he asked, returning the flask.

"Kentucky Bourbon mixed with an energy potion that Professor Snape and I whipped up." Jack replied with a chuckle.

Ron grinned, thinking that he'd have to get the recipe. Straightening up, he looked around.

"Medic Detail!" he shouted. "Collect the wounded. Everyone else, STAND DOWN!"

Ron waited until the medical detail started moving before going to check on Hermione. He noted that Bill and Arthur were taking Ginny back to the castle. "Hermione, can you walk?" he asked, eying her injured leg with concern.

"I'm not sure, Ron. Help me up and we'll see," she said wearily.

Hermione stood with Ron's help. When he let go of her, she started to topple over. He quickly scooped her up into his arms.

"Ron! You can't carry me," she protested.

Ron gave her a stern look. "Mione, shut up. I'm going to carry you and that's final."

Hermione looked at Ron, surprised. She then wrapped her arms around his neck as he took her down the steps from the battlements, a small smile on her face despite her wound.

On top the battlements the sudden pops of apparating people caused people to tense and point their wands outwards again.

"Settle down people," Jack called loudly. "It's only the Ministry Aurors coming in for clean up detail."

Ministry of Magic, Death Chamber...

Dumbledore felt Harry's wrist, then at his neck.

"Amelia," breathed Dumbledore. "He's still alive somehow. Get to St. Mungos and bring all the help they can spare. We may still be able to save him. Come to Hogwarts with them."

Picking up the sword, he laid it across Harry's chest and pulled out his wand. "Portus," he mumbled, and then he touched the sword and tapped it with his wand. The two vanished from sight as Amelia sprinted from the Death Chamber towards the Ministry apparition point.

Hogwarts Infirmary...

Poppy Pomfrey gasped as Dumbledore appeared in the center aisle of the infirmary with Harry. She rushed over to check him.

"BASIL," she yelled as she levitated Harry's limp form and guided him into one of the private rooms set aside for the seriously injured. Placing him on a bed, she turned and pushed Dumbledore from the room.

Basil Askerton was walking towards Madam Pomfrey when he noted more people from St. Mungos portkeying in. He quickly grabbed a medi-witch and dragged her along with him. The door to the private room slammed shut, leaving Dumbledore standing outside, holding the sword of Gryffindor. The sword grew progressively hotter in his hand.

Dumbledore was finally forced to release the sword and levitate it. He stood for a few more moments staring at the closed door before trudging out of the infirmary with the sword silently following him. Even though they had won the battle and the war, he felt as if they had somehow lost.

Amelia met him just outside the infirmary doors. "Albus, how is he?" she asked worriedly.

"I do not know, Amelia. He is gravely injured, can they save him? I do not know, we can only hope and pray, I fear."

She searched his face for any signs of hope before acknowledging his comments. "I've sent word out that Voldemort's been killed. Aurors are coming in to remove the bodies for identification and to pick up any Death Eater survivors. They'll also keep any press out of the castle for a few days. We'll have to speak to them eventually, though. In the meantime, word has been sent out for help, and healers are coming to Hogwarts from all over the country."

Dumbledore nodded mutely. He felt so tired. Never had he felt as old as he did right now. "If you'll excuse me, Amelia, I need to put the sword in a safe place, then I must see to my students. There are many parents who need to be told that their child has been injured or killed in the battle. It is my burden as Headmaster to tell them," he said heavily.

Amelia's eyes grew wet with tears. "No, Albus. Put the sword away, then we'll both share that burden," she said gently.

On the Approach Road to Hogwarts...

Alastor Moody, Jack Parsons, Kingsley Shacklebolt and Hestia Jones trudged up the road from the castle. Their progress was slow as they picked their way over and around the bodies. Craters from cannon fire and spells made the ground uneven and rough.

Soon they reach the place where Harry and Voldemort had fought. They stood over the burned and desiccated body for a while, saying nothing. The corpse was a shallow echo of its former self. The place where the sword entered the chest was clearly visible. Hestia pulled out a camera and began taking pictures. The photos would later serve as part of the evidence.

Kingsley motioned several nearby Aurors to bag the body so it could be moved to the Department of Mysteries. Once there, experts would destroy the remains after they had identified the body.

Jack turned and looked back at the castle where injured and dead were still being moved off the battlements. Hestia stepped over to him and placed her hand gently on his shoulder. Jack murmured something Hestia could barely make out as a tear ran down his cheek.

"Breathe not a whisper here;
The place where thou dost stand is hallowed ground;
In silence gather near this upheaved mound -
Around the soldier's bier.
Here Liberty may weep,
And Freedom pause in her unchecked career,
To pay the sacred tribute of a tear
O'er the pale warrior's sleep."

Moody glanced up at Jack curiously.

"It's part of a poem called a Soldier's Grave. It was written during the American Civil War by an unknown author for his fallen comrades," he replied, unashamed of his tears.

Hestia wrapped an arm around his waist as they started back to the castle where the healing could begin. Behind them, Aurors portkeyed to the Ministry, taking the body of Voldemort with them.

The Great Hall...

If the infirmary was quiet, then the Great Hall was a cacophony of noise. The moans of the wounded, the occasional scream and the sound of weeping people echoed around the large room.

Dumbledore and Amelia Bones paused in the entrance to the hall and both scanned the rows of beds in the makeshift hospital. Against one wall, rows of covered bodies lay stacked two deep.

Near one end of the hall he spotted the Weasley family clustered around three beds. Fred lay in one, his arm wrapped in bandages. In the middle, lay Hermione. Percy was in the last bed. Arthur was holding Ginny in his arms while Molly fussed over Fred and Hermione. One of the St. Mungos healers was attending to Percy.

Dumbledore sighed heavily and approached them while Amelia walked among the other beds, offering words of comfort and thanks. Molly saw him approach and her face paled at his grave expression. Ron, sitting next to Hermione, let her clutch his arm. Bill and Charlie stood with their father and sister, waiting to hear what Dumbledore had to say.

Trying to put off the inevitable, Dumbledore nodded to Fred and Hermione. "They're fine, Albus. And Percy will recover," said Molly tensely.

"Excellent, Molly. I am pleased to hear that," he said, clearly stalling.

Ginny broke free from her father and rounded on Dumbledore. "DAMN YOU, OLD MAN! JUST TELL ME. HE'S DEAD, ISN'T HE?"

Dumbledore looked at the small woman and a tear rolled down his cheek. He tried to put a hand on her shoulder, but she flinched away from his touch and stood her ground.

"Ginevra, you need to be very strong now. Harry is upstairs in a private room in the infirmary. He's been very badly injured and, to be truthful, I do not know if they can save him. Even if they can, I think he may not come out of this fight unchanged."

Hope suddenly sprang into her eyes. "Alive?" she whispered fearfully. She looked up at her mother, whose expression echoed her own. Hermione leaned against, Ron weeping on his shoulder.

"Ginny," Dumbledore began gently. "I do not know the full extent of his injuries. He may not survive. But keep your hope. Hope is all we have at this point. I shall send word to Madam Pomfrey to inform you if and when she knows what his condition is."

Ginny wrapped her arms around herself and nodded. Arthur stood and embraced her, trying to lend the young woman his strength.

Hogwarts Infirmary Private room...

Poppy and Basil both sank tiredly into chairs. It had been far too close for either of them. Both healers had nearly exhausted their own magical reserves trying to stabilize Harry. In the end, it had taken the combined efforts of six healers to do so.

The turning point had come with the appearance of Fawkes and two other Phoenixes. They had landed on the footboard and spent hours crooning to Harry and the healers. They lent their magic to the healer's spells and strength to Harry. He wasn't out of the woods, but he wasn't in danger of imminent death either.

Madam Pomfrey knew she was close to collapse, but she had other charges to see to. She took a half dose of a pepper-up potion to give her a little more energy. She wasn't going to do any more healing, but she did intend to check on people.

Blaise Zabini had been moved up from the Great Hall. His injury was too severe to risk a trip to St. Mungo's.

Minerva McGonagall and Severus Snape also occupied beds in the infirmary. Minerva's injuries weren't serious, but the Defense Professor was a mess. Though his injuries looked frightful, he would survive. Serena was tending his wounds.

Seeing a strange light near the closed infirmary doors, Poppy went to investigate. Opening them, she was surprised to find Hermione Granger and nearly all of the Weasley family camped out in sleeping bags. She was about to berate the entire family when Ginny shot to a seated position and looked at her with an expression of fear.

"Madam Pomfrey... how is he?" she blurted out. Her voice wasn't loud, but none of the people were really sleeping anyway. Every one of them sat up and looked at her.

Molly conjured a chair for Poppy to sit on. Poppy sent her a grateful glance before sitting down heavily. "He's alive Ginny, although only Merlin knows how. By the time the Headmaster brought him in, he had very nearly bled out. We've gotten him past the immediate crisis, but there may be others. Right now, he's totally exhausted his magical reserves and is in a coma. I have no idea when he'll awaken from it."

Ginny's face crumpled and she turned to her mother. Molly took her daughter's hand, and then turned to the medi-witch. "How badly was he injured, Poppy?" she asked in a low tone.

Poppy sighed. "He's been badly burned on his left side. He has a classic flailed chest and most of his ribs are broken. He was hit with a cutting hex from the top of his shoulder to his hip. There's evidence of no less than fourteen near misses with the killing curse, and the bones in his left hand have been crushed. Those

were the major injuries. I couldn't say how many minor cuts and bruises he has, not to mention broken bone other than his ribs and hand."

Ginny flinched with each injury Pomfrey listed and she wondered how he had survived this long.

"The real problem is his magical reserves. With the reserves so dangerously low, we're forced to wait until they recover before we can really begin healing him. We exhausted six healers lending him energy, and we have three phoenixes singing to him, keeping up what little strength he has," she finished wearily.

"When will I be able to see him?" Ginny asked.

Poppy frowned for a bit. "I know you want to see him child, but give us a day or two. He's not out of the woods yet, and he's so badly bruised you'd barely recognize him," she concluded. She didn't voice her real reasons to Ginny. Harry was still in critical condition and she did not want Ginny to see him in this condition, should he not make it. Let her have her memory of him as he was, she thought.

Voldemort's Lair, Wales...

Wormtail staggered into the building, his arm badly burned. He'd been in Hogsmeade rounding up stragglers when Harry dueled Voldemort. There'd been just enough distance between him and the battle to give him a fighting chance of surviving and escaping. Now he was back in the lair.

The building was empty, but that wouldn't last long. When Voldemort died, so had the Fidelius charm used on it. Even now, the wards were disintegrating, causing the building to tremble violently. Soon, Ministry personnel would find the building and start ransacking it.

Wormtail made his way painfully to Voldemort's potion storage lockers. Taking a bag from one locker, he opened the others and filled the bag with potions. He then shuffled off to the treasury room.

Gathering up as many galleons as he could, he shoved them into the bag. The burn and the loss of his silver hand hindered his process, but he managed. The hand had been an enchantment from his Master. With Voldemort dead, it had fallen off, useless.

He was a driven man now, hunted and on the run. His plans were in ruin. He must have time to recover and escape!

Wizarding England, April Eighth...

By six the next morning, the news was spreading like an out of control forest fire. The Daily Prophet and the Quibbler both ran special editions.

HE-WHO-MUST-NOT-BE-NAMED DEAD!
TITANIC BATTLE AT HOGWARTS
THE BOY-WHO-LIVED SAVES US ALL!

Yesterday, a battle ensued at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry between Ministry, Goblin and Hogwarts forces and those of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Amelia Bones, Minister of Magic, has confirmed that, as a result of the battle, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was killed. His body has been recovered and positively identified by Unspeakables from the Department of Mysteries.

Minister Bones is quoted as saying, "I am pleased to announce the death of Voldemort. I know the country, indeed, the whole world, can breathe a sigh of relief tonight. But our victory was not without great cost. Our

hearts and our prayers go out to those families who are suffering the loss of a loved one. We also wish a speedy recovery to all those who suffered injuries."

During the battle, the town of Hogsmeade was burned to the ground. Hogsmeade, population 1507, had been evacuated by Ministry Aurors earlier in the day. Following the attack on Hogsmeade, nearly three thousand Death Eaters, mostly foreigners, attacked Hogwarts. The school was defended by forces trained by Harry Potter and diverse others. During the course of the battle, Ronald Weasley led the gallant Phoenix Brigade, a group of highly trained and specialized fighters taken from the student population, and with the aid of Ministry Defense Forces and fighters from the Goblin Nation, they held against overwhelming odds.

The climax of the battle came when Harry Potter dueled He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named in a one on one battle while those on the field watched. Potter, age 17, was seriously injured in the duel, but he managed to kill He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Ministry sources are confirming that more than one hundred people died defending the castle and almost two hundred others have been injured.

Minister Bones is quoted as saying that, "We owe an eternal debt of gratitude to the heroes of the light who fought to defend the castle, including the Goblins who so graciously came to our aid as well as the students and even the house elves who helped with the wounded. As to Mister Potter, words cannot express the debt that all of the Wizarding world owes this young man. We can only hope for his speedy recover from his injuries."

For interviews from the defenders, see page 2.

List of the dead and injured, see page 2.

Ronald Weasley, Red Headed Heart Throb or Military Genius? see page 3.

Harry Potter knocks Gilderoy Lockhart off Teen Witch Weekly bachelor list, see page 3.

A brief history of Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, see page 4,5,6

In Wizarding taverns and towns all over England, celebrations broke out. There was a spontaneous parade in Diagon Alley. As word spread to other countries, messages of congratulations flooded the Ministry. The Wizarding world breathed a collective sigh of relief and toasts were made world wide to the Boy-Who-Lived.

Meanwhile, the cleanup continued at Hogwarts. Magical construction crews had been called in to dig a mass grave for the Death Eaters and the bodies were laid out and buried, unceremoniously. Few people wanted or cared to spend any time mourning their loss.

It was a sad and much more solemn story as the bodies of the defenders were identified and returned to their family's for burial. For the few who called Hogwarts home, plans were set in motion to lay them to rest in the northern courtyard, near the tunnel to Honeydukes.

Other crews were brought in to help with repairs to the castle. The first through third years were due back in eleven days and Headmaster Dumbledore decided that, for now at least, all classes would be suspended until the younger students arrived and the castle made safe.

The Ministry helped by sending Mind Healers. Between mourning for fallen friends, the post-traumatic stress and anxiety induced by the battle, the student population was very much in need of help.

Ministry Defense Forces started leaving the castle. Of the six companies brought in by the Ministry, only two companies remained behind to help with the clean up. The big surprise was the Goblin Brigade. Once the battle was over, their axes were put away and they started working on repairs to the castle stonework. The Astronomy tower had been toppled by a hit that landed roughly at its mid point. The Goblins started moving the stones, which made up the tower, into neat piles at its base in preparation for its reconstruction.

Hogwarts, evening time...

Ginny Weasley trudged back to the common room. Madam Pomfrey had refused to allow her to see Harry once again. She was shocked and furious to find that a party had broken out among the people staying in the common room. When George, Ron and Hermione came over to offer her a drink, she tore into them for partying when so many were dead, and many other friends still lay in the infirmary. Then she stormed out, leaving them with shocked expressions.

For a long time she walked the corridors of Hogwarts, aimlessly. She nearly jumped out of her skin when she heard a voice behind her.

"Ah, Ginevra. I see you, too, are hiding from the celebrations. May I join you on your walk?" asked Dumbledore.

Ginny nodded in acceptance. The truth was, she could use some company. Without Harry, she felt lost and incomplete. Madam Pomfrey had not given her an update on his condition since last night.

They walked for a bit before Dumbledore began to speak. "During the first war, when James and Lily were killed and Voldemort defeated, there were celebrations everywhere. Professor McGonagall, Hagrid, after taking an infant boy to a home where we hoped he'd grow up loved and safe, spent our time in my office, weeping for our lost friends. All around us, the rest of the Wizarding world, including your own family, celebrated the fact that the Dark Lord had been defeated.

"Few cared that an infant boy was made an orphan, and fewer still cared that many people were dead. They just knew that their lives were once again safe. Oft times, a victory is bought at a terrible price, Ginevra. Your family celebrates the victory and, for a brief moment, forgets the cost. It's part of the healing process, to put our past behind us. Your family is almost as worried about Harry as you are. But they celebrate the freedom that Harry has given them. Do not be too harsh with them."

As they walked, Dumbledore deftly steered her towards the infirmary without her even realizing it.

"I think I understand, Headmaster," she replied. "I guess I'm just not in a mood for celebrating right now."

"No Ginevra, nor am I. But we cannot deny that right to others. Your time for celebrating will come soon enough. And I daresay that, when it does, it will be extra special for you," he said, opening the door to the infirmary and waiting for her to enter.

Startled, she looked perplexed for a moment. "But Headmaster, Madam Pomfrey..."

"Has decided it's time for you to see your fiancé, Miss Weasley," he finished with a smile. "Mind you," he continued sternly, "Harry is still incredibly weak and in a coma, but his magical reserves are coming back at an unprecedented rate. So much so that the healers have been able to start resorting to more magical healing methods. He is not yet awake, and no one knows when that will happen. Madam Pomfrey feels he is finally out of danger," he said as he led her to the private room in which Harry lay.

Ginny stopped when she saw Harry on the bed, face down and naked, except for a sheet covering him. One leg was heavily bandaged, as well as most of his torso. Running the length of his back, a nasty scar showed where a cutting hex had caused massive damage to his flesh.

Walking closer to the bed, she bent down to examine his face. Bushing the hair away from his eyes, she frowned at the mass of bruises she found.

Fawkes and another Phoenix were perched on the footboard of the bed, watching Harry intently.

"Oh Harry, love. What have you done to yourself?" she whispered.

Ginny looked up as Madam Pomfrey came in. Poppy stopped for a moment and, looking at the girl, her gaze softened. "I expected you a bit earlier than this Miss Weasley, but no matter. I assume you wish to help care for him?" she asked, her usual gruff manner missing.

Ginny nodded eagerly with a hopeful smile.

Severus and Serena (April Ninth)...

Serena sat next to her husband, watching the healer check him over. He had taken a lot of fragments in his back from an explosion. His wounds hadn't been immediately life threatening, but they'd been severe.

He blinked his eyes slowly and tried to look around. With a frown, he realized he was on his stomach. He hated sleeping on his stomach. Irritable, he tried to roll over on his back but a pair of hands stopped him.

"Don't move, Severus. You hurt your back and need to stay on your stomach for a while longer," said a familiar voice.

"Serena? Blast it woman, you know I hate being on my stomach. At least come over to this side of the bed so I can see you."

When she'd done as he asked, he was surprised to see that her eyes were red and she'd obviously been crying. "Serena? What's wrong?" he asked, suddenly concerned. His wife never cried!

"Damn you, you slimy snake! How dare you get yourself injured like that?" she cried.

He scowled. "I didn't do it in purpose, for Merlin's sake!" When her eyes filled with tears, he sighed heavily. "Easy, Serena. I'm still alive and I'm not going anywhere," he said, trying to reach out to her.

She grabbed his hand and squeezed it tightly, still crying. "You better not leave us Severus, or I'll hex you into next week!"

Severus' eyes bulged when he heard his wife's choice of wording.

"US?" he asked with a gasp. "You're not..."

She nodded, smiling at him. "Remember when Hagrid was shaking the apartment and we took advantage of the bed vibrating? Well, we both forgot the charm and ..." Her words trailed off and her eyes started to twinkle.

Severus' mind was whirling and he tried to form a reply. Fortunately for him, another voice cut into the conversation.

"Ah Severus, I see Serena has finally gotten around to telling you the good news," said Dumbledore with a twinkle.

"You told the headmaster before telling me?" he asked her with a growl.

"Now Severus, do not blame Serena. Besides, it was Molly Weasley who figured it out after the battle and Madam Pomfrey confirmed it. We didn't hide the fact. It seemed best to let the news get out. So many people needed to hear good news right now."

Severus tried to heave himself out of bed, but fell back, gasping in pain. "The battle!" he said. "What happened? Harry?"

Dumbledore helped Serena get Severus more comfortable on the bed before replying. "We won, my boy. It was close and costly, but we won. As to Harry," Dumbledore sighed heavily. "He was badly injured and lies in a coma. We all hope he will wake soon, but there is no telling."

Severus relaxed against the pillow and closed his eyes for a brief moment in thanks.

"I will leave you to your rest, Severus. I have no doubt you will be up and about in no time," said Dumbledore before walking off.

Serena pulled a potion off the nightstand. "Madam Pomfrey says that if you drink this nice potion she may release you tomorrow morning. It will help you sleep."

As she helped him drink the potion, he realized she was treating him like a baby and started to get annoyed. Then he remembered. A baby. She was pregnant and they were going to have a child! As his eyelids grew heavy, he growled at her. "We will discuss this tomorrow, wife."

"Yes dear," she replied with a smirk.

Blaise, Susan and Amelia (April Tenth)...

Amelia Bones watched her niece from the doorway of the infirmary. Blaise had been badly injured during the battle. Although the healers had gotten to him in time, an infection had set in and his body had raged with fever for several days.

Susan got up and dipped a cloth in a nearby basin. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she wrung out the cloth and placed it on Blaise's forehead. Once done, she took his hand in hers and held it tightly.

Amelia walked over to the bed and laid a hand on her niece's shoulder. "You love him, don't you Suse?" she asked softly.

Susan didn't look away from Blaise, but she nodded. "He asked me to marry him after we graduate, Aunt Amelia. I didn't give him an answer. Instead, I asked for some time to think about it. Now I wish he would wake up so I could tell him."

Amelia was struck by the fact that Susan now looked and acted so much like her sister when she was younger. Her niece had grown into a fine young woman, one who was in love. From what she had learned, Blaise had a squad of Phoenix Brigade guarding the exit from the Honeydukes tunnel and a force of more than thirty Death Eaters had overwhelmed them.

During the battle, both of Blaise's legs had been seriously injured when he had collapsed the tunnel on the Death Eaters. Only a few of the Death Eaters made it into the castle.

"Suse," she said gently. "I'm sure Blaise knows how you feel about him. He's alive and you'll be able to tell him how you feel when he's better."

"Tell me what?" mumbled a barely awake Blaise Zabini. Susan gasped and started to cry, holding Blaise's hand to her cheek. Amelia smiled softly at the young man who had won the heart of her niece and decided she had better get to know him.

Three beds over, another reunion was occurring as Neville wept with joy and Luna held him tightly to her breast. Like Blaise, she had been badly injured, but was on the mend.

The old man...

Everywhere he looked, it was the same soft white. Up, down, right, left, forward, backward. He didn't know where he was, or where he was supposed to go. Every so often he would catch flashes of people and places, images of a dark cupboard with only a crib mattress in it, a fat man wielding a belt, a young woman with red hair, a ramshackle, leaning house, a castle, a tall, gangly redhead man, and a bushy brown haired woman. He couldn't make any sense of them. He didn't recognize the people or the places.

He drifted in the strange white nothingness, asking himself simple questions. "Where am I?", "Who am I?", questions for which he had no answers.

Every so often the whiteness would swirl and seem to clear, then he'd shudder as strange sensations washed over him, or he'd hear voices.

"Harry dear, you've got to come back to us..."

"OY Mate! Madam Pomfrey says you can hear us..."

"My love, you'd better come back to me. I can't live without you..."

Some of the voices and sensations filled him with a sense of longing and loss, others he'd shudder back from and want to escape. The words themselves had little meaning to him.

After what seemed an eternity, the whiteness started to fade away and he found himself standing in a glade near a small pond. Across the pond, a clearing and a small straw thatched cottage appeared. In the distance, he could hear the tolling of a single bell, its song so pure and so perfect it made his heart soar. Making his way to the cottage, he stepped up to the door and knocked.

"Come in, my boy! Come in," said a voice from within.

He stepped into the dim interior uncertainly and looked around in confusion. Sitting at a table was a kindly looking old man whose infectious grin seemed to light up the room.

He stepped in carefully and walked over to the table. The old man motioned to a chair and he sat down, still looking around in confusion. The old man eyed him for a moment.

"What's the matter, boy? Confused? Lost, are you?" he asked. "That will never do, my boy. No, not at all!" Then the old man reached across the table and grasped Harry's hands in his.

Hogwarts Infirmary Private Room (April Fifteenth)...

Poppy, Molly and Ginny had just finished changing the dressings on Harry's burns. His back was nearly healed. His ribs were one of the first things they healed once his magical reserves had built up high enough. His wounded back was healed well enough that they were able to put him on his back instead of his stomach. Unfortunately, he would always carry the scar. The only two problems really concerning them where the severe burns and the coma.

His burns had proven to be especially difficult to heal. The effect of the flame curse, and whatever had followed it, had caused the skin to crisp and it was slowing the healing process. Poppy was confident that the burns would heal, but they would continue to cause him pain for quite some time to come. His leg was healing fine, but his shoulder was proving slow to heal.

Poppy watched in guarded amusement as Ginny sounded out her mother on the possibilities of getting married this summer. Molly wasn't against the idea, but as she reminded her daughter, Harry had to recover

first. Molly finally agreed that she would broach the subject with her father, which was far more than Ginny expected to hear.

Molly wasn't happy, but Ginny could be as stubborn as she was and she had already pulled out her trump card. Informing her parent that, once she turned seventeen this summer, she didn't need permission from them, her mother threw up her hands in surrender.

As the three women sat, talking quietly, Ginny reached down every so often to caress Harry's cheek. It had been ten days so far and he had shown no signs of coming out of his coma. Ginny hadn't given up hope, but the others were beginning to lose heart. Ginny turned her attention back to Poppy and what she was saying.

"... I think we can remove most of the dressings for the burns tomorrow. But his shoulder hasn't been responding as well as the rest of his body. We'll have to keep the dressing there for..." She trailed off in shock as Harry broke out in a nimbus of light.

The two phoenixes sprang aloft and started to croon joyously.

Harry...

Harry gasped as his identity, his very being, flowed back into him as the old man held his hands. Finally, the old man sat back, looking immensely pleased with him self.

"There, that's better! I hate trying to talk to someone who doesn't know what I'm saying. You with me now, Harry?" he asked with a smile.

"Y-Y-Yes sir. But... am I dead?" asked Harry.

The old man leaning back in his chair and laughed at Harry's question. Harry couldn't help but grin at the old man's reaction.

"Dead? No Harry, you're not dead. You came mighty close for to it, and in doing so you lost a part of yourself for a while, but you're not dead. Not dead at all! By all the Gods, great and small, I'm proud of you, my boy! So very proud! Now, I'm sure you have some questions for me, and since we have some time still, go ahead and ask."

Harry nodded and thought for a moment. "Please sir, who are you?"

"Names again, Harry? I would have thought we'd gotten beyond that point the last time we met. Ah well, perhaps its time to reveal a little of my tale.

"My name is so old, no record of it exists in your time. It didn't even exist five thousand years ago. But for our purposes, you may know me as the First Wizard. I am the first human to ever conquer magic. A long time ago, when the worlds was still young, man could not touch the magic around them. Then I was born. Human, like those around me, but with an ability to wield magic, like you.

"During my youth and my middle years, I abused my powers and privileges. People thought I was a God and treated me like one. I sired the race of wizards off many women. And I taught magic to many of my children. As I got older however, I realized I was abusing my power and was being cruel to the non-magical humans. By the time I understood my mistake it was too late. When I realized I was dying, I created this place to spend my time watching over and trying to guide the Wizarding world back to the correct path.

"From this place, I found could nudge people, sometimes directly, but usually indirectly. I remember this one young upstart named Merlin...ah but that's a story for another time. You see, Harry, your task isn't complete. Yes, it was your task to kill Voldemort, but that isn't your assigned life's work.

"The real work is just about to begin. You've been given great power Harry, and it will continue to grow, perhaps to a point greater than mine. Your task is to use that power to bring our world and the muggle world closer together, peacefully."

Harry sat back in his chair, stunned. The old man looked at him and grinned. "And here you probably thought I was going to send you after another Dark Lord, eh Harry?"

Harry scowled. "If so, you can bloody well take the power back. My Dark Lord slaying days are over, Sir," he replied, somewhat grumpily.

The old man laughed, rocking in his chair and slapping his knee.

Then the old man turned serious. "Harry, the root of Wizarding evil against Muggles and Half Bloods lies not in greed, or in lust for power. It lies in thinking that we're better than them, that we're somehow special. Yes, there will be future Dark Lords and evil will once again cover the land. You can never stamp it out entirely. But you can make it a lot harder if you teach people to respect one another."

The bell in the distance suddenly grew louder and the light flared brightly. "We may or may not meet again, my boy, but I have chosen well in you," the old man said as he faded from view in the glaring whiteness.

Hogwarts Infirmary Private Room...

Ginny gasped in surprise as the hand she was holding squeezed hers slightly. She leaned over Harry and searched his face carefully.

"Harry," she said softly. "Come on love, open your eyes for me, please."

Harry cracked one eyelid open slightly. He tried to speak but his throat was parched. It was all he could do to make a croaking sound.

Ginny lifted his head and Molly placed a cup of water to his lips, letting him drink. Madam Pomfrey bolted from the room to get Healer Askerton while Ginny lowered his head back to the pillow.

Harry blinked a few times. "Gin?" he asked weakly.

She sat on the edge of his bed. "Shhh... I'm here, Harry. So is Mum. How do you feel?" she asked gently, tears streaming down her face.

"Hurts real bad... tired... What happened?" he asked in a pained whisper.

She brushed the hair from his brow with a gentle hand. "You won, my love. Now all you need to worry about is getting better," she said as Poppy and Healer Askerton rushed back into the room.

Molly moved out of the way so they could work. She sat on a chair near the door and wept softly while the two healers began running a series of diagnostic spells.

"He says he's in a lot of pain and very tired," Ginny said to the two healers, the relief clear in her voice.

Poppy handed her a potion for his pain while they continued to run diagnostics on him. Ginny helped Harry drink the potion just before he slumped back in the bed, nearly asleep.

Hogwarts (April Seventeenth)...

News that Harry had awoken from his coma very nearly caused a stampede to the infirmary and it took Madam Pomfrey and Dumbledore to restore order. It was decided to limit his visitors to family and special guests only until he had recovered sufficient strength. Only Ginny, Molly and the two phoenixes were in constant attendance.

Madam Pomfrey allowed Harry three sets of visitors a day, after each meal. If they were first time visitors, they received a lecture from Poppy before they entered his room.

At noon, Poppy was talking to Remus and Tonks about Harry's condition. Molly had taken Jason off their hands for the time being and was walking him around the school.

"I want to be clear on a few things before you go in," started Poppy sternly. "Do not talk about the battle or the losses. He's not strong enough now. Keep your conversation light. If he dozes off, the visit is over. He's very weak and I wouldn't be letting anyone in to see him except that both the Minister and Dumbledore are insisting. Rumors that he died in the battle are spreading and we need to put a stop to them."

Cowed by Poppy's stern tone, Remus and Tonks nodded fearfully and entered the room. Harry lay on the bed and Ginny was trying to get him to take another spoonful of soup. He had been propped up by a couple of pillows, as no one would allow him to sit up yet.

Remus and Tonks move carefully into the room and smiling at Harry. His eyes lit up seeing them both.

"Hey there, Cub. I'm glad to see you're doing better," Remus said, taking the seat next to the bed. Tonks smiled through her tears. She sat carefully on the edge of the bed and held his hand.

When Harry opened his mouth to speak, Ginny put the last spoonful of soup into his mouth. He glared at her. She ignored him. Turning back to Remus and Tonks, he smiled weakly.

"Wotcher Harry, you're looking right dishy today," Tonks quipped.

Harry chuckled feebly. "Codswallop, Tonks. No one will give me a mirror, but I suspect I look like I've been trampled by a stampede of Chinese Fireball dragons."

Remus glanced at the two phoenixes. He knew Fawkes on sight, but the smaller bird was unknown to him.

"Harry, what's with the phoenixes? Are they helping the healers?" he asked.

"I think so, Remus. Fawkes and the other one have been lending their magic to strengthen the healers in their tasks. I know why Fawkes is here, but I'm not sure about the other one."

"Have you tried asking them?" Tonks asked curiously, eyeing the two red and gold birds.

"Tonks! He's not allowed to do any magic yet," insisted Ginny firmly. "He's not strong enough."

Actually Fledgling, all you had to do is ask, sent Fawkes. You are strong enough for us to talk.

Harry blinked for a moment. "Um... Gin? Fawkes seems to disagree with you and Madam Pomfrey," he said. "Fawkes, who is your companion?" he asked the bird aloud, so the others could hear at least one part of the conversation.

Her name is Arella, Fledgling. She is to be your life companion, as I am to Albus, came the surprising reply.

"Oh Merlin," Harry moaned. Ginny rushed over to his side, looking at him carefully.

"Harry, are you in pain? Do you need a potion?" she asked worriedly.

"No Gin, just a minor complication. I want you to meet Arella, my life companion. Arella, meet Ginny, my other life companion," he said with a bit of a smile. Ginny glanced at the small phoenix in surprise as Arella launched herself into the air and came to land on Ginny shoulder.

"I think you two girls should get to know each other," murmured Harry as he started to drift off again. "We're going to be together a long time." And with that, he fell asleep, never noticing Arella nuzzling Ginny, or Remus and Tonks smiling broadly at the two of them.

Later that evening, Ginny had propped Harry up for his dinner. So far, they had kept him on liquids and soft foods. Tonight's dinner was a stew with some fresh bread. He had finally convinced Ginny that he could feed himself, although the motions exhausted him. Ginny sat quietly by his bed watching him eat. They both looked up when the door opened to admit Ron, Hermione and Dumbledore.

He tried to straighten himself in the bed, but Ginny stopped him by placing a hand on his shoulder. Hermione walked over to Harry and kissed him on the forehead before taking the other chair. Dumbledore conjured two more chairs for himself and Ron to sit on.

"Harry," began Dumbledore. "Classes will resume when the younger grades return to school in a few days. I've spoken to your teachers, or I should say, they are threatening me with bodily harm if I don't reinstate you to your classes. I've asked Miss Granger here to bring you your assignments. Depending on how you feel, you may even be able to take your NEWTS with the rest of your class."

"Madam Pomfrey informs me that you're making good progress. If you do what she tells you, she may consider releasing you in a week. If not, she says you may end up spending all of this month in the infirmary," he finished with a twinkle in his eye.

"Then I guess I better do what I'm told," Harry murmured. "Merlin knows I like Madam Pomfrey, but I'm really tired of the infirmary."

"Sir, no one has told me... Who? How many did we lose? They won't even show me a newspaper," he said quietly. Everyone in the room flinched slightly.

Dumbledore lost the twinkle in his eyes and looked at Harry for a long moment "We lost many," he said softly with a pain filled voice. "Thirty eight from your Phoenix Brigade, another forty from the Ministry, teachers, student volunteers, Hogsmeade people, nearly one hundred in all..."

Harry looked at Ron, scowling. "Who, Ron?" he asked in a hard tone.

"Professor Flitwick in the courtyard and Professor Trelawney when the Divination Tower collapsed. Colin Creevey, Hannah Abbott, Padma Patil, Terry Boot, Lavender Brown, Ernie Macmillan from our group. Wan Chang died saving Serena Snape..."

As Ron rattled off the list of names, Harry's expression changed. Each name was like a knife blade to the heart. Finally, unable to take it anymore, he waved Ron to silence as tears started to slide down his cheeks.

"So many...," he choked out. Ginny grabbed his head with both hands and stared into his eyes. She could see the pain and despair in their emerald depths. "Love, look at me. You have to fight this. You can't let it drag you down, not in your condition. This was not your fault," she said fiercely. "Voldemort and his Death Eaters did this, not you. They're dead now. They'll never be able to harm another living being."

He reached out to her as he had done so many times in the past. Ginny held him carefully, avoiding his bandages as he cried on her shoulder. Hermione joined him in the hug. Drawing strength from the people who loved him, he hammered at the depression that threatened to overwhelm him, beating it back.

Madam Pomfrey stuck her head in the door and took in the scene. Frowning, she vanished for a moment, and then came back in with a calming draught, which she handed to Ginny. Between the two of them, they were able to get Harry to drink the potion.

"I'm sorry we upset you Harry, but it had to be said. There are people, important people that need to see you soon. The Minister, Ragnot from Gringots, and even the press, though we can hold them off for a while. I have told the press that, instead of an interview, you would simply release a statement and let them take a few photos. A rumor has been started that you were killed in the battle and, as much as you hate the attention, it would be best to get it over with early, rather than to put it off. You know as well as I do that the media will hound you and analyze your every move if you don't give them something," Dumbledore said.

Relaxing in Ginny's embrace as the calming draught took effect, Harry looked up, puzzled, at Dumbledore. "A statement, Sir? What kind of statement?" he asked.

"Just a brief statement saying that you are all right, and something brief about the fight that took place, Harry. And please, call me Albus. While you might be a student here for a few months longer, you ceased being a student in my eye a long time ago," came the reply

Mutely, he nodded at his Headmaster, his mind wondering about how to write a statement. Maybe Hermione would help him? He glanced at Hermione and she seemed to understand what he was silently asking.

"I'd be happy to help you write something, Harry," she said with a smile.

Hogwarts Great Hall (April Twenty Second)...

Harry Potter dressed slowly. His shoulder was still bandaged and would be for weeks to come. Ginny had taken over the job of caring for that particular wound. But true to his word, he had followed Madam Pomfrey's directions, hence his early release from the infirmary. He was still weak and exhausted himself easily however, and the burn still caused him significant pain.

Harry had difficulty dressing. His weakened state and wounds made the process slow and painful. Ginny, dressed in her Phoenix Brigade robe, was a pleasant distraction from the pain. They had opted for his Gryffindor battle robe because it put the least amount of pressure on his bandaged shoulder. The robe had been taken off him when he had arrived in the infirmary, so many days ago, and during that time, they had been repaired and cleaned by Dobby.

Once he was dressed, he ran a quick brush through his hair and eyed the ribbon warily. Ginny chuckled and grabbed the brush out of his hand.

"Harry, if you're going to have long hair, you need to take better care of it than three strokes with a brush!" she said with some degree of asperity. Stepping behind him, she started brushing his hair. It was only the second time she had done so and he was coming to realize why she acted the way she did when he played with her hair. It was very relaxing.

"Love?" Ginny said, trying to get his attention.

"Hmmm?" he grunted in reply, his eyes closed in pleasure.

"What would you say to a mid-August wedding?" she asked impishly.

Harry's eyes snapped open and he tried to turn his head to face her. Unfortunately, that only pulled on his burn, causing him to gasp with pain. Ginny grabbed his head and straightened it out.

"Easy, Harry. Remember what Madam Pomfrey told you? No sudden movements."

"B-But Gin? An August wedding?"

"Mum and I had a talk... She got Dad to agree."

"Truly?" he whispered.

Harry's shoulders started to shake. Alarmed, Ginny quickly tied off his ponytail and moved around to face him. He was grinning, and trying to stifle a chuckle. With his one good arm, he grabbed her around the waist and pulled her to him, resting his head against her chest.

"I'm glad I missed that 'talk'", he said, laughing. "How many windows did the shouting match break, Gin?"

She slapped his arm gently. "Prat!"

Ron stuck his head through the door, interrupting them. "OY Harry! No shagging in your condition. Besides, I'm hungry," Ron whined. "Hermione, Neville and I are waiting to help you to the Great Hall, so get a move on, will ya?"

"Alright, we're coming," replied Ginny.

Harry noted that Ginny wasn't the only one wearing her Phoenix Brigade robe when he stopped out of the room. He eyed the other three and admitted to himself that they looked very professional. "Wait, not another ceremony like last year," he complained.

"Well, if you'd stop killing off the odd Dark Lord who pops up and now and again, they'd stop holding them," Ginny quipped cheekily.

"You're supposed to be on my side, you know," he murmured with a grimace.

The Great Hall...

It took Harry a good fifteen minutes to make the walk from the Infirmary to the Great Hall. To prevent the walk from totally exhausting him, he moved much slower than normal. Arella came along, sometimes flying, sometimes perched on either Ginny or Hermione's shoulder. She wanted to perch on Harry's shoulder, but until his burns had been healed, she didn't.

Arriving at the Great Hall, he was surprised to see that a large, long table had been set up at one end of the room with all the teachers clustered at that table. As they entered, a hush fell over the crowd. The room had been returned to its normal size. Only the students and a few select others were present tonight. Harry swayed slightly and tightened his grip when he spotted all of the empty chairs. Ginny held onto to him and looked at him with worry.

She led him up to the head table, rather than steering him to their normal spot. As he passed each table, people stood up. The Phoenix Brigade were dressed in their uniforms, but were scattered throughout the crowd instead of in formation.

As they approached the Head table, Dumbledore stood up, smiling. "Harry, I know you hate ceremony, especially when it's one that puts you in the spotlight. So tonight, we've arranged for a little family dinner rather than a huge gathering. Your Phoenix Brigade wears their uniforms to honor you, but there will be no speeches, no reporters, and no politicians tonight. Just your Hogwarts family."

In a much lower voice he added, "Of course, you realize that you won't be able to escape the spotlight, Harry. However, we'll do our best to hold that off until you're feeling better."

"Thanks, Albus. I appreciate it."

Ginny led Harry over to a table where Remus, Tonks, their children and the entire Weasley brood were sitting.

Harry sat down and started to reach for one of the platters when he felt a tug on his arm. Looking over, he saw Erika smiling up at him.

"I'm glad you feel better, Professor Harry," she said.

Harry smiled down at the small witch. "I'm glad I'm back too, Erika. Did you enjoy your trip?" he asked.

"Yeah, but Eric was being annoying," she pouted. "He kept making my hair green when I tried talking to the boys."

Harry glance up at Remus, "You know Remus, sounds like Marauder material here," he said with a smirk. Remus nodded and smiled slyly. Turning back to his plate, Harry found it gone and several potions sitting in its place.

"You know the rules, Harry. Potions before eating, or Madam Pomfrey will make you go back to the infirmary," Ginny said, scolding him.

Harry grunted in annoyance. Then, deciding on a little payback for her mothering tendencies, he said, "All right, Gin. While I'm drinking these, why don't you tell me what you have planned for August?"

Ginny's face flamed. She had only just managed to convince her parents and hadn't told anyone, other than Hermione, of her plans yet.

"Harry," Molly said in a teasing tone. "It's not nice to put your bride on the spot like that. Besides, I figured we have something small at the Burrow."

"Quite right, that! The Burrow is the best place for a wedding. Cheaper too!" quipped Arthur, getting in on the act.

And that set off the whole table as everyone demanding explanations. Harry was frowning, however. There was something he needed to nip in the bud before things got out of hand.

"Arthur," Harry said in a deceptively calm voice. "I promised Ginny a while back that, when we got married, I'd pay for everything. We can have it at the Burrow, if that's what she wishes, and I can think of no greater cook than your wife, but I'm paying for everything."

"Harry, we can't let you pay for everything. Besides a wedding is so expensive," Molly protested. Ginny and Hermione were staring at Harry. Remus was smirking. Harry rolled his eyes at the older man. Typical Marauder!

"Molly, the Weasley family is paying the biggest part of this. You're giving me the most valuable part of your family, your daughter," he said softly.

"You have sons coming out of your ears. Those two," he said pointing at the twins, "probably came at a discount rate. But you only have one daughter."

He ignored the outraged expressions of the twins.

"Can you hold a wedding and spend less than...oh...a million galleons, Molly?" Harry asked over the babble of voices.

"Yes, but.."

"Good, then that's your budget. I'll owl Gringots tomorrow to make the transfer," he said smugly. Glancing at Ginny, he couldn't help himself any longer. He started laughing. Her mouth was hanging open and her face was as red as a beet. He would have continued laughing, but it pulled painfully on his bandaged shoulder, causing him to gasp.

Ginny immediately snatched up his pain-relieving potion and handed it to him.

"Someday, they'll fix it so a person can take these bloody potions after a meal. They ruin the taste of everything," Harry said with a grimace after he drank his potions.

"Er... Harry? A million galleons is a trifle too much money," Arthur said nervously. He wasn't sure Harry was serious or not.

"Harry was only teasing, Dad. Weren't you, Harry?" asked Ginny.

Harry sat silently for a moment before breaking out into a huge grin. "Well, you know Gin, if you wanted a fancy wedding, I'd give it to you. I still intend on paying for everything, but yes, I was kidding," he replied, chuckling at the relieved looks he received.

All the Weasleys at the table relaxed. "Harry, are you really planning on marrying my sister? Especially now, when every bird in the country is interested in you?" asked Ron, rather unwisely, as it turned out.

Harry scowled at Ron and his eyes sparked ominously. Hermione smacked him in the back of the head. "Really Ron, what kind of question is that to ask?" she exclaimed.

"You know Ron, if I didn't love Hermione like a sister, I'd turn you into a cabbage for that. Then I'd feed you to a goat. Instead, I think I'll just turn you over to your brothers, Fred and George," he added with a frosty smile, causing Ron to gulp nervously.

"Besides," Harry continued. "Maybe you should be thinking along the same lines, Ron. After all, you're on Teen Witch Weekly's Eligible Bachelor List now, in case you've forgotten."

"Actually Harry, that's something I wanted to ask you about," began Hermione hesitantly. "I talked with Ginny about it and was wondering how you'd feel about a double wedding?"

Harry grinned broadly and nodded. "I think its bloody brilliant, 'Mione, but do you think you can train him in time? I suppose I could poke him a few times with my sword if you want," he offered innocently, while Ron began to sputter indignantly.

"I have my own ways of training, Harry Potter, thank you very much," Hermione replied with a bit of a snip while Harry snickered at her.

"Am I interrupting?" asked Dumbledore, smiling.

"No, Sir. Please join us," replied Harry.

"I'm glad I caught you all here. First off, I understand this August there will be several weddings," he started.

"Several?" interrupted Harry curiously.

"Yes, well, it seems that, besides the weddings of the Weasleys, Miss Bones and Mister Zabini are planning their own nuptials for this summer. Professor Parsons and Hestia Jones are talking about a wedding during the summer. Miss Lovegood and Mister Longbottom are, however, planning on a Christmas break wedding.

"Assuming he maintains his grades, Mister Zabini looks to be entering government service, along with his fiancée, after the summer. Mister Longbottom has applied for an apprenticeship under Professor Sprout for a herbology mastery, which will put him close to his fiancée next year.

"And unless my memory has failed me Harry, you hoped for a position here at Hogwarts. I know you wanted to be assistant Professor in the Defense class, but alas, I need a Charms Professor and your understanding of charms and their uses borders on intuitive. I'd like you to consider the position. It pays better and offers a full Professorship and a larger apartment, which would be suitable for you and your new bride.

"As you are aware, the Ministry has decided that all fifth year students who helped in the fighting will be granted an automatic outstanding on their DADA OWL. They also declared that all sixth and seventh year students are to be granted an outstanding in their NEWTS. So, Miss Weasley, you have one free class and Madam Pomfrey has told me about your wish to pursue a healer or matron career path. She's agreed to begin that training for you next year.

"Finally Miss Granger, Madam Pince has informed me that she wishes to retire at the end of this year. I fear the battle was a bit too much for her. I'd like you to consider taking her position, as well as helping Professor McGonagall with the first through fifth years in Transfiguration."

Hermione was all but bouncing in her seat, unable to control herself. "Finally!" she exclaimed joyfully.
"Unrestricted access to the restricted section! I'll take it, I'll take it!"

Ron sighed heavily and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a galleon coin and handed it to a snickering Harry.

After dinner, Dumbledore stopped Harry and Ginny from leaving the table so he could have an additional word with them privately.

"Harry, I've promised Madam Pomfrey that you will do no strenuous work for the next two weeks. Therefore, I've taken the liberty of moving your belongs into faculty quarters on this level. It isn't much, just a small study room, two bedrooms, a bath and a small kitchen/dining area. Dobby will make your meals in the kitchen." He peered over his half moon glasses, his eye's twinkling. "Given your condition, I think it's safe to say that if Miss Weasley wanted to move into the spare bedroom, she would not put her virtue in danger. Unless, of course, you'd prefer Madam Pomfrey?" he finished, trying not to grin.

"NO! Ginny's fine Sir, really. I'll behave and drink my potions," Harry replied with a slight stammer.

"Very well then, the door is behind the portrait of Gilroy the Gluttonous. The password is Treacle Tart." With that said, the Headmaster left the table.

As Harry and Ginny made their way to the exit of the Great Hall, he was grateful to see Ron and Hermione waiting for them. Ginny gave them a quick explanation of where she was taking Harry and the other couple followed, curious.

As far as Harry was concerned, they could have been laying him out on a table in the Great Hall. He didn't care where he slept so long as he slept. He was trembling from exhaustion. The very last thing he remembered was Ginny's soothing touch as they laid him in bed.

Grimmauld Place, two days later...

Grimmauld Place was undergoing a transformation. During the war, it had always been busy with people coming and going. Someone had always been on duty. But now, with the death of Voldemort, the Order was shifting how it operated. Harry and Remus had made it clear that the Order would always be welcome to use

the old mansion for their meetings. But with the Order relaxing, they were slowly converting it back into a home for the Lupin Family.

Tonks was coming downstairs to put lunch together for Jason when she saw Remus, his face twisted with rage, rush from the Order's conference/map room. Without so much as a glance or a word, he stepped outside and apparated away. Concerned and curious, she stepped into the conference room to look at the maps.

Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Ministry of Magic...

Kingsley Shacklebolt was surprised to see Tonks' face appear in his floo.

"Hello, Tonks..."

"Kingsley, Remus has discovered that Pettigrew is alive and in Knockturn alley. He's gone after him. You have to stop him before he kills that traitorous rat!"

"Wha? Pettigrew? We're on our way, Tonks."

Kingsley rushed from his office, collecting Aurors as he went.

Knockturn Alley...

Remus stepped into Knockturn Alley. Although he was no longer a werewolf, he had retained the keen senses that the disease had given him. In the dimly lit street, he could see few people about. With the death of Voldemort, the Dark Arts had taken a big hit in popularity. It was conceivable that most of the shops located in the alley would go out of business within the year.

Remus walked the alley slowly, checking each shop as he passed it. Then his nostrils flared as he picked up the scent down a dark side alley. Pettigrew! And he was coming this way!

He didn't bother with his wand. It was too impersonal for this. As Pettigrew left the alleyway, Remus leapt upon him, knocking the small man to his knees. He had a grip around his throat and he ignored the blows Pettigrew rained down on him as he trying to break his grip.

Suddenly, there were other hands pulling him off Pettigrew. A curse was shouted and Pettigrew dropped to the ground.

"Lupin, let us do our job! You're either going to settle down and behave or I'll haul your ass in to cool off over night in the holding tank," growled Kingsley Shacklebolt.

Two Aurors had Remus pinned to a wall while Kingsley paced in front of him. A third was standing over Pettigrew.

"Are you going to relax, Remus? I don't want to haul you in," Shacklebolt began. "He'll get what he deserves, I promise you that. We just have to do it by the numbers," he said, finishing softly.

Remus nodded in defeat. He was so close! At a signal from Kingsley, the two Aurors released him. He watched mutely as the third Auror knelt over the little man gasping and now crying Pettigrew.

Pettigrew's one good hand moved. Cat quick, the Auror kneeling over the little man froze as the knife blade slid across his throat. With a strangling, gurgling sound, the Auror collapsed sideways.

Pettigrew sprang to his feet and pulled out his wand. So did Kingsley and the other two Aurors, but they were too late. With faster than normal reflexes, Remus whipped out his wand and yelled "DISCEDO!"

It was a spell that Harry had taught him. A spell Harry used for making jewelry, for splitting metal in half.

Pettigrew looked confused. His wand hand dropped limply to his side. "Moony, how could you!" he gasped. He stood for a moment as the nerves in his lower body tried desperately to send signals to his brain through a severed spinal column. Then, to the shock of the Aurors watching, the upper half of Wormtail's body tipped backwards and fell to the ground with a sickening wet sound. His lower half remained upright for a few more seconds before collapsing.

Remus sagged to his knees. He had avenged James and Lily and so many others. But it left a bitter taste in his mouth. He barely noticed when one of the Aurors portkeying away with the injured Auror.

"Go home to your wife and family, Remus," Kingsley said tiredly. "There's nothing more you can do here."

With tears streaming down his face, he stood and walked from Knockturn alley.

Grimmauld Place...

Remus sat on a couch in the main living room of Grimmauld Place. He hadn't said anything to Tonks when he returned. He'd simply sat down and stared at the floor. His clothing was dirty and torn from the fight and he had more than a few bruises.

He ignored Tonks and her efforts to get him to talk. He ignored everything. In desperation, Tonks finally called Harry.

It was evening when Harry and Ginny arrived by floo after getting permission to do so from Dumbledore. Harry was still very weak, but this was Remus, this was family. Tonks and Ginny sat on one couch while Harry joined Remus on the other.

"Remus?" asked Harry quietly.

Remus continued to stare at the floor, unmoving, ignoring him. The death of Pettigrew had brought forth in Remus' mind all the pain and hurt he felt when James, Lilly and Sirius died.

Harry carefully laid his hand on his shoulder, the burn pulling painfully and making him wince. "Remus, Mum and Dad and Sirius are probably really hacked off at you right now," Harry said forcefully.

Remus blinked and turned to look at him.

"They wouldn't want you to mourn them all over again, Moony. You've avenged them, like I have. Sirius and Dad probably expect you to raise up a whole new generation of Marauders now."

Remus turned to Harry and pulled him into a painful hug, then he started to weep. "It's finally over, you mangy wolf," Harry said, smiling and looking over at Tonks.

Tonks and Ginny both sat on the other couch, watching, their own eyes wet with tears. Tonks rose and went to Remus, kneeling down in front of him. With Harry's help, she removed her husband's painful grip from Harry's body and pulled him into her embrace.

Once he had calmed down, Remus looked over at Harry. "Thanks Cub..." he started but Harry overrode him.

"It's alright, Remus. You're family, and for family, we do anything it takes to help one another," Harry explained. "I do have one request though. Could we go see them this weekend? I've never been to the grave site..." Harry said, trailing off.

Remus nodded with a sad smile.

The Potter Family plot, Godric's Hallow...

The ancestral gravesite of the Potter family was situated only a few miles from the place where Harry's parents had been killed. Atop a hill, the graves surrounded an ancient chapel. It was a pleasant and cheerful place with many trees. A groundskeeper neatly kept the grass.

The four living people visiting the three newest graves disturbed that peace. Although there was no body, Sirius had been placed next to James and Lily. Family stays together.

One person knelt before the three graves for a few moments of reflection and silent prayer. When he stood, three people joined him and they moved away, looking at the names and dates on the other stones. For nearly one thousand years the Potter family had buried their dead in this place and Harry was visiting his family, all of them.

Finally, the four walked to the exit, leaving three graves with fresh flowers. They never visited the chapel which had been the first structure erected in the cemetery. It hadn't been opened in centuries.

As with so many early chapels, the altar sat upon the grave of the founder of the line. Clearly carved at the base of the altar was the name Godric of Gryffindor.

Hogwarts, Near the end of May...

Harry was nearly fully recovered by the middle of May. He would always carry a scar on his shoulder where the burns had been the worst. It occasionally caused him some pain, but he had salve for that, and Ginny was always more than willing to put it on the spots he couldn't reach well enough.

With the help of Hermione, he had managed to catch up with in his NEWT classes. With the Phoenix Brigade on permanent stand down, and the Advanced Defense and DADA classes cancelled for all members of the Brigade, he had ample time to study and catch up, as well as time to relax.

His burn had caused mobility problems with his arm, so in answer to that he had taken to using the Room of Requirement. In there, he placed a large heated pool so he could swim and exercise his arm and the scar. At first it was just Ginny and himself. Then Ron and Hermione joined them. Soon, others started making use of the pool. Blaise, who was still using a cane, came to exercise and improve his legs, which had been badly injured in the battle.

Today was slightly different. Classes had been cancelled and the student body was assembling in the Quidditch Pitch. The Minister of Magic was on hand, as was the press. Today was a formal celebration of the victory over Voldemort.

And that was why Harry came to find himself seated next to the Minister of Magic, on a stage, facing hundreds of people. Students, their families and the Ministry Defense Forces were standing off to one side, along with the Phoenix Brigade.

Harry and Ron had argued about what he should wear. Harry insisted on wearing his Phoenix Brigade uniform rather than Gryffindor's battle robe. Harry finally won the argument when he told Ron he didn't want to be singled out as anything special. Wearing Gryffindor's robe would do just that.

Harry sat as the speeches were given and medals handed out. The Minister had decided to save Harry for last and that had him slightly annoyed and fuming. Why couldn't he sit with his friends in the stands instead of being up here on display? Scowling, he glanced over at Ginny and admired how wonderful she looked in her uniform, now adorned with two Orders of Merlin, first class. She caught his eye and held it.

"Patience love, it will be over soon." she sent to him.

"I know. I'm just sick of being on display. The bloody Boy-That-Lived and all that crap," he sent back.

She smiled in return and suddenly Harry shivered as she did something he had never experienced before. It was almost like a mental caress, soothing away his irritation.

"Merlin, Gin! What was that!" he sent to her.

"Something I came up with, love. I'll tell you about it later. Pay attention, it's nearly your turn," she told him.

"... and so I'm pleased to start a new tradition today and present Mister Harry Potter with a new award. The Hero of the Light award," said the Minister.

Harry bounced up from his seat and walked over to the Minister to receive the award. After she had placed it around his neck, she stepped back so Harry could say something to the crowd.

He coughed once and fidgeted nervously for a moment. "Thank you, Minister Bones. Friends, family and honored members of the media, I stand before you today because of a failure made long before I was born.

"A Dark Lord does not come into power overnight. No, he or she is slowly created and shaped by prevailing acceptable values, such as looking down on muggle born, or half bloods. More than half a century ago, a boy was born to a broken family, his mother a witch, his father muggle. The father abandoned them because he hated magic. His mother died in childbirth and he spent his early years in a muggle orphanage.

"As he grew and learned about his heritage, he turned to the Dark Arts. He could have been stopped long before he gained power, but people ignored all the warning signs.

"Friends, we can never allow such a thing to happen again. We must be aware of the children who are growing up unloved and unguided. We must take care of our own and recognize that half bloods, such as myself, and muggle born, have an equal place in our society.

"We must make sure every child of the Wizarding world is brought up in a loving environment. That is the way we prevent another Voldemort. That is the way we prevent another Dark Lord from threatening our world.

"I stand here and tell you that our world failed so many years ago. And because of that failure, many friends and family are dead. We must not allow that to happen again!

"I am grateful for this honor, but I would have been happier to have never needed to earn it. We must make the effort to see that all magical children are raised in a loving and caring home. And we must understand the muggle world for they have powers we do not! We must reach out to them and learn to live with them, together and in peace. If we don't, chaos will result.

"Minister I accept this award, but I do so not for myself. I accept this award for Wan Chang, a pureblood who threw her self into the path of a killing curse to save a muggle born teacher. I accept this award for Hermione Granger, a muggle born who was wounded protecting our world. I accept this award for Cedric Diggory, a pureblood who died simply because he had honor and wanted to share an award with me. I accept this award for our fallen comrades who died to protect what they believed was right. Finally, I accept this award for all the children today in the hopes that they will make this a better world," he concluded.

As he walked back to his seat there was a ground swell of clapping as people rose to their feet. He sat, his face burning with embarrassment, and really wished he had a place to hide. Above the stage there was a flash of flame as Arella appeared and glided down to perch on his good shoulder.

He was surprised to see both Ginny and Hermione crying as they clapped. He was even more surprised when Ron produced handkerchiefs for each of them.

Chapter 16 & Epilogue - The Final Chapter

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...

It had taken a lot of hard work, but Harry was able to graduate with his classmates. Hermione and Ron had helped him catch up while he was recovering from his wounds.

Graduation. The word was bittersweet in the mouth of Harry Potter. For seven years he had spent some of the best and worst times of his life at Hogwarts. Graduation seemed to him like the closing of a door on his life. He hoped that with the closing of one door, the next door would be better.

Next term he would return to Hogwarts for what he hoped would be a long, fruitful career doing what he enjoyed. He had accepted the Charms position and agreed to help out with the Defense Against the Dark Arts classes, but mostly he looked forward to Charms. As a parting gift to Dumbledore, he had left him with a copy of his notebook of charms he had created, more than two hundred of them.

With the death of Pettigrew, the last surviving inner circle member of the Death Eaters, any that might have escaped found themselves very deep holes to hide in. The Ministry had decided to keep their Defense Forces in active service. After Voldemort, no one was willing to take the chance that another Dark Lord would arise unchecked again.

Other countries were sending representatives to Britain to learn about the training techniques and weapons created and used in the battle. Fred and George were quite happy with the initial orders from the American Department of Magic. Warbangers, it seems, was going to be a success after all.

Minister Bones enacted new laws easing, or in some cases, doing away with, the restrictions on all non-human magic races. The Goblins in particular had greatly benefited from these changes. Another change that surprised many was a new law making it a fineable offence to abuse a house elf. That law, suggested by Harry, made Hermione especially happy.

The Minister had also convinced the government to make child abuse a major offense. All Wizarding children, even those born of muggle parents, were to be checked periodically to ensure their safety and their home environment. This meant contacting parents soon after Wizarding children were born and informing them of the Wizarding World long before the child received his or her letter from Hogwarts.

Remus, using some of his part of the Black family fortune, was in the process of setting up a Lycanthropy Research Foundation in the hopes that it might someday be cured. Since Harry had cured him using a combination of his power and his animagus phoenix tears, he was hopeful that phoenix tears and some combination of magic would prove to be the answer. The Marauder Research Center would eventually become one of the premiere research centers of the Wizarding world, mixing both magical and muggle technology.

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in July...

Dumbledore was going over some dispatches from overseas Order members when two bursts of flame caused him to look up, startled. Wings and Arella appeared, singing a song of greeting which Fawkes returned.

"Harry!" Dumbledore exclaimed once Wings had transformed. "I surprised to see you this early. I know you're eager to get started teaching, but I would have thought that your upcoming wedding would have kept you busy."

Harry winced a little at the word "wedding", and then plunged into his real reason for coming to Hogwarts. "Actually Albus, Ginny and Hermione are off selecting wedding robes, so I figure I have several hours off at least. And with all that free time, I thought I'd visit and maybe solve a problem I helped make worse for you."

"Oh? What problem would that be?"

"Well, it's about the lemon drops. It was bad enough when you had four million of them, but I...umm...interfered with Hermione's revenge on the twins and caused the number of lemon drops to increase."

Clasping his hands in front of himself on the desk and leaning back, Albus peered over his glasses, eyes twinkling. "How do you propose to solve the problem?"

"Can we go to the room where you're keeping them, Albus? It would be easier to show you than to explain it," Harry replied.

"Of course, Harry. If you will follow me?"

Dumbledore lead the younger man from his office to the room where the massive quantities of lemon drops were stored. Arella dropped to land on Harry's shoulder.

"So tell me the truth, Harry. You're hiding from Miss Weasley and Miss Granger, aren't you?" he asked with a knowing smile.

Harry sighed. "Yes, Sir. I've spent the last the four days trying on robes, so this morning when I figured out the solution to your problem, I thought I'd use it as an excuse to get away for a while. It's almost enough for me to wish there was a new Dark Lord to worry about," he muttered.

"Alas, I fear you are learning the one critical fact of a wedding, Harry. The Groom is a mere prop that the Bride dresses up for her special day. Ah, here we are," he said, laughing as he opened a door to a huge storage room.

Harry looked into the room and shook his head. There had to be hundreds of boxes filled to the brim with lemon drops. Turning to Dumbledore, he said, "Now Albus, the spell on the drops is just a charm. In thinking about it, I realized that the drops themselves weren't charmed, but the total amount of candy."

"Yes, I can see that Harry. But that doesn't solve the problem."

"Oh but it does, Albus. Let me show you."

Harry raised a hand and it flared with a bright yellow glow. There was a sound like hundreds of miniature tornados ripping through the room. A few seconds later, all of the boxes were empty and lemon drops whirled in a tight vortex in the center of the room. As the seconds passed, Quaffle sized lemon drops dropped out of the bottom of the vortex.

When he was done, he had converted the millions of small candies into several hundred Quaffle sized super lemon drops.

Dumbledore's expression was pained. "Harry, I can't give these to students. It would take them a year to eat it. They're just too big!"

Harry shook with laughter. "No, you can't give them to students. But I know for a fact that Grawp loves lemon drops. I gave him a large one before we left on break and he ate it in a few minutes."

Dumbledore's eyes lit up as understanding dawned.

"Sure, you have several hundred lemon drops, Albus. But in a few years, if you spread them out..."

"An excellent solution, Harry. I might even be able to rid myself of all them!" Dumbledore exclaimed with a smile. "Now since you're here, let's go back to my office. We can talk about what you'll be teaching this year. And this way, your Miss Weasley won't be able to yell at you for laying about today."

Meanwhile at Diagon Alley...

"So did you really buy that codswallop from Harry today, Ginny?" asked Hermione

"Not really, but he's spent the last four days trying on wedding robes and I still can't decide which one he should wear. I figure a day off won't kill him. Besides, I know some of those robes were bothering his shoulder. Last night I spent over an hour trying to work the knots out of it. He could barely move it," she replied frowning.

Hermione replied with a frown of her own. She had seen Harry while he was recovering and some of his wounds lingered still on the inside. Killing Voldemort had affected him deeply. As far as she was concerned, Voldemort was a monster that needed to be put down, but Harry had been disturbed by it. For all his power and abilities, he really was an intensely private and gentle man who just wanted to live his life in peace.

Ginny sighed and started talking again. "At least he's having fewer nightmares. He's had several sessions with a mind healer, at the Headmaster's insistence. I don't think that's helped nearly as much as just having someone to hold him at night."

"Has he dropped any hints about the honeymoon?" asked Hermione curiously.

Ginny shook her head in frustration. "No, blast it! Ever since the press found out about the wedding, he's kept that secret to himself. He still wants you and Ron to come along and all he'll say is its warm, unplotable, and has places to swim. I think Remus knows where it is, but if he does, he's not telling Tonks. I asked her.

Ah! Here we are, Madam Malkin's. I hope she's got what we need, 'Mione. I don't think I want to spend another four days hunting for the right robes," she said, opening the door.

Entering Madam Malkin's, the two women went to the counter where the matronly woman who ran the business was finishing up with a customer.

"Madam Malkin? I'm Ginny Weasley..."

"Ah, of course! Your Mister Potter floo'd me earlier this morning. What a nice boy he is! And you must be Miss Granger, yes? Not to worry dears, Mister Potter left me very specific instructions. Come into the backroom please. I've had four of my very best designers come in today with ten of my seamstresses. If we can't find what you want, we'll make it..."

Hermione glanced at Ginny, startled. She could only shrug in reply. "Come on, 'Mione. I see Harry's getting me back for dragging him all over creation this week for his robes. Now it's time for us to play dress up."

Eight hours later, two exhausted but pleased young witches left Madam Malkin's. The day had been a whirlwind of dress robes and talk of weddings. It seemed that all of Madam Malkin's workers were women with little better to do than gossip and talk of fashion. The upside of the experience was that both Ginny and Hermione had managed to find what they wanted. Both were surprised that Madam Malkin refused to discuss the cost. She would only repeat that Mister Potter had taken care of it already.

Later that evening at the Burrow, the Weasley and Granger families were sitting down to a dinner outside when Harry apparated in, carrying a small chest. Harry placed the chest on the table between Ginny and Hermione, then gave Bill a knowing smirk. Bill started laughing at him and Ginny looked suspiciously between the two.

She reached for the chest, but Harry stopped her. "No, not now Gin. Look inside after dinner. Bill and I spent the afternoon putting it together and it'll be best if you wait 'til dinner is done. I take it you found what you wanted from Madam Malkin's?" he asked with an innocent look.

Hermione rounded on him, her eye's flaring. "Harry Potter, do you know what we went through today? And what's this about it all being paid for? I can pay for my own wedding robes, thank you very much!"

Harry sat down, chuckling at Hermione, "I'm sure you can, Hermione, but like I said, this wedding is on me. Since you and Ron wanted to make it a double wedding, that means your share also. Besides, look at the trouble I saved you. You spent a single day in one place. You and Ginny have dragged Ron and I to nearly thirty shops in the last four days."

Molly decided to nip this in the bud. "Now Harry, shopping for robes is part of the fun."

Harry sat rubbing his shoulder and looking surprised. "You didn't find something at Madam Malkin's then?" he asked incredulously.

Ginny patted his cheek fondly. "We did, but that doesn't mean we wouldn't have enjoyed looking at the other shops. And what you did must have been dreadfully expensive, Harry. Madam Malkin had her designers and seamstresses set aside just for us, and I don't think she served a single customer the whole day."

"Good. If you hadn't found robes, you wouldn't be allowed to look inside the chest until you did," he replied while filling his plate.

Ginny waited until Harry had finished eating before bringing up the small chest sitting between her and Hermione again. "So, are you going to let us know what's in the box or not?"

Harry took a final drink from his glass, "Bill and I spent the better part of the afternoon today going through some of the items in the Black and Potter vaults. I don't know what kind of robes you two picked out, but we thought you might like some items to go with them. Most of the stuff from the Black vault needed to have curses broken, so most of this comes from the Potter vault. Pick something from the box that will go with your wedding robes," he said with a broad smile.

Ginny opened the lid for a second, then slammed it down with a yell. She paled considerably and looked at Hermione. Hermione opened the lid on the chest and it fell backwards as her hand released it. The chest was filled with jewelry.

Harry laughed. "There should be something in there that'll match your robes. I'll return what you don't use to the vault."

Ginny and Hermione started to poke through the chest while the rest of the family sat back, watching in amusement.

A wedding tomorrow...

As the date of the double wedding approached, Harry got more and more nervous. He wasn't nervous about marrying Ginny. He was nervous because the wedding was quickly becoming a circus. True to his word, he had picked up the bill for the costs. That wasn't the problem. The problem was the decisions that just had to be made. How was he supposed to know whether or not to go with a rose/lily mix or fairy blossoms and Dragon blooms for flowers?

Ginny and Hermione tried to include him on every decision. Why they didn't ask Ron was beyond him. The only decision he hadn't been involved in related to Ginny's wedding robes. And the only decision he had made and kept secret was the one about the honeymoon.

Originally, he planned on going back to the Bahamas. But Remus talked him into visiting Black Island. It had been owned by the Black family, and was a small island not far from Crete in the Mediterranean. Having visited the place, he decided it was better than the Bahamas. He had kept that secret because the media had somehow found out about his upcoming wedding. Black Island had a nice little cottage, well if you can call a fifteen bedroom building a cottage... It was staffed by house elves and had nearly every luxury one would expect.

When Ginny had last shown him the guest list, he had felt lightheaded with shock. His contribution to the list of attendees had been Remus, Tonks, their three children and a few professors. The rest of the very large list held the names of all the Weasley's attending. He knew the family was large, but he'd never expected something like this. The Weasley's weren't a family; they were an army with breeding capabilities far outweighing rabbits.

The thought of breeding led to thinking of children, which led to thoughts of the honeymoon night. With a flush, Harry handed the list back to Ginny, ducked his head, mumbled something about a shower and bolted from the room.

The night before the wedding found Harry lying on his back, staring up at the stars. His mind wandered from one thought to another while he absently rubbed his shoulder.

"Hey there," said a familiar voice. "Somehow I thought I'd find you out here, Harry. What's bothering you?" Ginny asked in a small voice.

Harry sighed and reached up for her hand as she sat down next to him. "I'm not sure, Gin. I guess I'm just overwhelmed by everything."

"You're not having doubts, are you?"

Harry frowned. He could tell by her tone she was close to tears. He rolled over to face her. "Doubts about marrying you? Never. I just didn't expect it to be this big a deal. Tomorrow there will be hundreds of people here. Merlin! I wish we could run to Dumbledore right now and have him perform the ceremony."

"I know, love. It's not quite turned out the way I envisioned it either," she replied softly.

"I knew that most of my life I was alone, but seeing the guest list broken down by family really hammered that point home. It made me feel... small. I guess that's as good a word as any."

Ginny stretched out next to Harry, facing him on the soft grass. She caressed his cheek gently. "Harry, by this time tomorrow, you won't be the last of the Potters anymore. Just look at tomorrow and what we have to go through as the beginning of a whole new line of Potters."

"I just wish Sirius or my parents were here," he said softly.

Ginny placed her hand over Harry's heart. "They're always right here with you, in your heart."

He smiled. "It must be really crowded in there then, Gin. You take up most of the room."

Standing, Harry helped Ginny to her feet and the two walked back to the Burrow, holding hands.

Wedding Madness...

It was all planned out, which meant, of course, that nothing went to plan. The twins had volunteered to keep Harry and Ron occupied for the morning until they had to get ready for the afternoon service. Fortunately, Remus and Arthur took that job. Unfortunately, that left no one to watch the twins. With all the guests coming in, Harry and Ron were forced to share a room for the night.

The first thing to go wrong that morning was due to a simple transfiguration charm cast by the twins before Remus chased them out of the room. Both Harry and Ron were running around trying to find underwear. The twins had transfigured all the boxers in the room into girls panties!

Remus transfigured some panties into boxers for the two of them, and then told them to put some casual clothes on for the morning, as they would be helping set up the chairs and tables for the outdoor service.

The twins stuck again when Harry and Ron went to set up the folding chairs. They quickly found that, rather than the lightweight chairs they were expecting, someone had charmed the whole stack of them to weigh over two hundred pounds a piece.

"REMUS," Harry bellowed angrily after spending thirty minutes dispelling the charms.

Remus and Arthur came running. Ron had tried to lift a few of the chairs and he was now leaning against Harry, wishing he hadn't.

"Find Fred and George..." Harry ground out between clenched teeth. His eyes were burning with anger. "Tell them if I find one more prank, they'll find that what I did to Voldemort was mild compared to what I'll do to them."

Remus turned away laughing and went in search of the twins. Arthur took it more seriously. He loved his boys and the last thing he wanted was Harry turning them into toads and feeding them to snakes.

Remus found George chuckling over a barrel of butterbeer. He had just closed the barrel after obviously adding something into it.

"George," Remus said. "I have a message for you from Harry. He says if he spots one more prank today, what he did to Voldemort will seem mild compared to what he does to you and your brother."

George paled. "Er... but we haven't been pranking him!"

"He's helping set up the chairs right now, George. And earlier this morning, neither him nor Ron could find any boxers to wear. It had all been changed into girl's knickers. Are you telling me you didn't do that?"

George looked down and scuffed the grass with his foot. "I thought Bill and Charlie were doing the chairs."

Meanwhile, back at the stack of chairs, Harry was still annoyed. The one chair he had tried to move had caused his scar to split at several points and his white t-shirt now had blood streaking it from the small cuts. Stepping back from the stack, his hands flared with magic and he levitated the whole stack into place, then into position.

"There Ron, it's done. I think they wanted us to bring out the flowers next, but I've got to get this thing taken care of before Madam Pomfrey and Basil arrive or I'll spend my last hours as a bachelor listening to lectures."

Ron nodded and waved him back to the Burrow while he started working on the flowers. In the distance, he could see his father yelling at Fred.

Stepping up to the back door of the Burrow, Harry paused. He had been told he wasn't allowed in until it was time for him and Ron to get dressed. So he knocked instead of just entering. A moment later, Molly appeared at the door.

"Harry, you're not... what happened to your shoulder?" she asked with concern.

"Fred and George were playing. Now the scar has split open in a few places. Can you have someone grab me a bandage, some of that salve Poppy gave me and a clean t-shirt?" he replied.

"For Merlin's sake, those two will be the death of me yet! Susan, be a dear and go up to Harry's room and get his salve and a t-shirt for him."

Molly conjured a chair outside for him and told him to remove the shirt while she cleaned the cuts.

When Molly finished, Harry realized he still had several hours to kill. So, transforming into Wings, he spent the next few hours soaring above the Burrow, with Arella at his side. This sort of flying was even better than flying his broom!

The wedding itself was a blur for Harry. He remembered two distinct points of it however, and they were forever etched into his memory.

His first sight of Ginny in her wedding robe caused his heart to hammer in his chest as if he'd run a race. She was breathtaking, The robe was shimmering white. It molded to her every curve until it flared out at the waist. The front had a plunging neckline that took his breath away. Around her neck was a necklace of diamonds and emeralds from the Potter family vault.

The second memory he had was more profound.

Because this was a double wedding, it was decided that Hermione would say the joining rite over the cup and Harry would light the cup like he'd done at Remus' wedding.

Murmuring the incantation, Harry released the magic into the cup. The cup flared incandescently and the liquid whirled rapidly as a veritable cloud of sparkles exploded upwards and spread out over all of the guests. Even in the bright sunlight, the sparkles were dazzling to the eye. As before, the music changed to its angelic choir. The four of them, Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione seemed to glow and Harry felt a link open to Ginny the likes of which he had only felt once before.

Harry looked smug and looked at his bride. He could feel her love pouring through the link to him. Harry turned to Dumbledore who was smiling broadly at the four of them.

"Later," Dumbledore murmured quietly before he continued with the service.

After the ceremony, Dumbledore held Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione back, while the guests gathered around the tables set up with food.

"Sir, can you explain what just happened?" asked a flustered Hermione.

Dumbledore arched an eyebrow. "I think Mister Potter might be able to explain it best, Mrs. Weasley. After all, he did it. Although I have to admit to being very impressed Harry. Normally it takes a four hour ritual to do what you did in seconds."

Harry looked embarrassed as the three of them turned to him. Ginny had a sly grin on her face. She suspected exactly what Harry had done. "Well, you see... I...well..."

Ginny laughed and jumped in to help him. "What I think my husband is so eloquently trying to say is that he soul bonded us. What I feel, he can feel, and what he feels I can feel. Think about Ron, 'Mione."

Ron suddenly blushed to the roots of his bright red hair and Hermione laughed. She hugged Harry tightly and murmured her thanks.

Wrapping an arm around his new bride, Harry and the others went to greet their guests at the wedding feast.

Hogwarts, Ten Years Later...

With the changes in the laws for children and the death of Voldemort, the classes at Hogwarts swelled in size. Harry Potter was promoted to Deputy Headmaster in his eighth year, following the retirement of Albus Dumbledore. Ginny Potter replaced Madam Pomfrey as the primary healer for the school and Hermione Granger eventually became the Transfiguration Professor when Professor McGonagall was confirmed as Headmistress for the school.

Harry built a house for Ginny in Hogsmeade. The local residents called it Potter Manor, but they called it home. It was a large home, with ten bedrooms, a study, a library and a Quidditch Pitch out back. Dobby and Winky came to work for the Potters as their house elves.

Ginny was grateful for the help considering that she had four children to raise. Molly Lily Potter, a red headed green eyed girl was their first born, then came James Arthur, Ronald Albus and Hermione Minerva.

Hermione and Ron opted to use faculty quarters in Hogwarts. Ron went on to help the Chudley Cannons win their first ever world cup two years in a row. Hermione had three children, Harry Ronald, Emma Ginevra and Susan Jane.

Fred and George eventually met a set of redheaded twins from Spain and married them. They were the last of the Molly and Arthur Weasley's children to marry.

Severus and Serena Snape had remained at Hogwarts. When he had been released from the infirmary after the battle with Voldemort, they had spoken about Serena's pregnancy. Severus tried to convince his wife that he'd make a rotten father, as he really didn't like children. His wife merely smiled and changed the subject.

A frustrating nine months later, a beaming Severus Snape held his daughter, Selena, in the crook of his right arm, and his son, Seth, in his left. He then smiled down at his tired wife and thanked her. She had smiled back and told him she was never going through childbirth again.

The children were a year away from attending Hogwarts. But growing up in the castle, surrounded by magic, they had none of the nervousness other ten year olds had at the prospect of attending one of the finest magical schools in the world.

Severus and Harry continued to work on finding the limits of his abilities. It wasn't until his twenty sixth year that his magical power stopped growing. By all accounts, he had surpassed Merlin's abilities. When he had turned twenty-five, he'd assumed leadership of the Order of the Phoenix and turned the organization into one dedicated to bringing the muggle world and the Wizarding world closer together.

THE END